

COMING BACK



COMING BACK
An Anthology of Dark Stories

Edited
By

Dorothy Davies

COVER ART

"Boardwalk Between Dead Trees" by Exsodus

GRAPHICS

Nathan J.D.L. Rowark

First Edition

Horried Press

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London, England

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DINNER WITH MAMA

Evan Purcell

Some dinners are special, especially when your time is limited...

Mama raised me. She raised me from the dead. It was kinda painful.

I didn't remember what stuff was like when I was dead. I'm sure things were all glowy and nice. It's probably best that I didn't remember.

I just remember waking up. In the mud. Alone.

I pulled myself out of the ground. It was a good thing that a part of my nose was gone, because I probably smelled bad.

"Hello!" I called. "Hello?"

I didn't hear anything. Not even an echo.

It took me hours to walk back home from the cemetery. I got lost twice. The neighborhood changed a little since I died. There was more graffiti.

It was hard walking that whole way. My knees and ankles kept making crack noises.

When I got to my house, my heart felt warm and good. This was my house. This was a safe place. And then I remembered that Mom and me had this big, awful fight right before I died. She was loud and shouty. She was always so mad that I hung out so much on the train tracks.

I was a little afraid about knocking on the door.

But then I did. This was my home.

"Mama," I called. "Mama? It's me. It's Delilah." I slowly opened the door. It creaked. I didn't see her, but I heard a few noises from the kitchen, like a gasp and a crashing plate.

"Delilah? It's really you? You're back?"

I nodded, but of course she didn't hear that so then I shouted, "Yeah, it's me!"

Mama ran into the living room. She looked at me and smiled. She didn't even recoil. I'm sure I looked gross and green and a piece of my nose

was gone, but that didn't matter to Mama. She grabbed me, picked me up and gave me a bear hug. It hurt my bones, but I didn't tell her that.

"I never thought I'd see you again," Mama said. "I didn't think this would work. I'm so sorry you woke up by yourself. I'm sorry you had to dig yourself out."

"It's okay," I said. It didn't hurt. Well, maybe a little.

Actually, besides a little pain, I didn't really feel anything. At all. Why didn't I feel anything? Why didn't my heart swell when I saw my mama? When she hugged me, why didn't I hug her back?

"I saved all your stuff," Mama said. "You can take a shower and then wear one of your nicest dresses to make you feel good. You're only back for a day. This spell will only work for a day, so I think you should wear your nicest dress. The one with polka dots."

"Sure, Mama."

Mama ran off into the kitchen and gave me enough time to shower, comb my hair and put on my dress that she liked so much. The water was real hot. And I tried not to brush my hair too hard, because pieces of it were falling out. I knew I looked gross. But I didn't want to look too gross.

After I put on my dress, I looked in the mirror. I didn't really scare myself, so that was a good thing. I was green and pieces of me were gone and my eyes were a little yellow. But my dress was nice and I had a big smile. Mama wouldn't be too scared of me.

But that wasn't what I was really worried about. I wasn't really worried about Mama. I was worried about me. Why wasn't I happier to see her? Why wasn't I happier to be here? Why did I feel so empty?

When I walked back into the living room, I felt that the air was warmer, but I didn't smell anything. I think I was supposed to smell something. I think I was supposed to say that it smelled real good.

"Mama? What's that smell? It smells real good."

Mama couldn't tell that I was lying. "It's your favorite," she said. "Meatloaf. You love meatloaf."

That's true. I did. But I probably couldn't taste anything anyway. I could barely move my tongue. "Mama?" I said.

"Yes, honey."

"Thank you. I'm glad we could have one more night together."

I sat at the dinner table. Mama put a big plate of steaming meatloaf in front of me. It looked very warm and very good.

"Well?" Mama said. "Are you gonna eat?"

"Yeah," I said. I started eating. Like I had expected, I didn't taste anything. I couldn't taste anything. I could barely chew. I ate three bites before Mama asked, "Do you like it?"

"Oh yes, Mama. It's real good."

"You know, Delilah, I don't know how long I have you back, but it's probably only an hour at the most. So I want to make sure you're happy. And I wanted to say I love you."

"I love you too, Mama," I said. But I didn't really feel that. I just felt blank and a little achy.

"Good," Mama said.

So I ate a little more. I didn't know if it was my imagination, or if I was trying really hard, but I think I started tasting some of the spices. I tasted a little pepper. I tasted some of the ketchup, too.

At first, we just ate in silence. But then we started talking about everything that had changed since the day I died. Mama started Pilates. She was dating a nice dentist man named Rick. All my friends graduated third grade and moved on to fourth. My cousins went camping for the first time. And everyone was missing me lots.

Mama asked me if I remembered what it was like to be dead, and I said, "No, but it was probably great. Once I go back there, I'm sure it'll be nice and fun." This made Mama happy. It made me happy too, saying it out loud.

And it was real funny too, because the more I ate, the more I could taste my meatloaf. The more I could feel it on my tongue. It was spicy and good.

"Mama, I lied to you before. About the food. But I can taste it now and it tastes delicious."

"That's good," she said. "Thanks for being honest."

Pretty soon, I ate it all up. And I felt warm and full and I didn't feel hollow anymore. I knew that Mama loved me and I love her back. It probably wasn't because of the meatloaf, but it might have been.

"Okay," I said. "I'm ready to go back to the cemetery now."

Mama didn't look at me for a second. She stared at her plate. It was empty too. Finally, she looked up, she made her mouth smile real big, and she said, "Okay. I'll get the car keys."

We didn't talk a lot on the drive to the cemetery, but we didn't have to. When we got out of the car, Mama held my hand and walked me back to my grave.

"Thanks," I said. "Today meant a lot to me."

Mom didn't say anything. She just gave me another hug. A big, warm bear hug. And this time... This time I felt it.

LONG DEAD HANDS

Kevin L. Jones

He kept coming back to his secret –until the night she came back too...

The streets were dark and empty. The blacktop road glistened under the autumn moon's light. Anthony White shivered as he looked down at his bare feet and rain soaked pajama bottoms. Where was he? How had he gotten here? He pushed a strand of wet hair from his eyes and studied his surroundings. He stood in the mouth of a filthy alley, the kind of alley that no one with a shred of common sense would walk down after the sun had set. He could not recall anything that had transpired from the time he had went to bed until he had awakened dazed on the deserted street. Frantically he looked for a familiar landmark but nothing was recognizable to him.

Then he began to notice something that seemed peculiar even under these surreal circumstances. It was raining quite hard but it made no sound whatsoever as it came into contact with the rooftops and the streets. He kicked over a metal trashcan that stood in the entrance of the alleyway. It made no reverberation as it slammed into the pavement. It seemed that the only noise in the entire world was the sound of his labored breathing. He felt panic well up inside as he desperately fought to maintain control. He knew if he could force his addled brain to process the strange events around him he would come up with a logical explanation for what was happening. He swallowed hard and used every ounce of his willpower to slow his breath. He was, after all, a high school science teacher and every day he taught his students that anything could be explained using the scientific method, no matter how seemingly bizarre the scenario was. Even in this insane situation, rationality was the one constant he could rely on. He shut his eyes momentarily to gather himself. When he opened them he found himself somehow transported dead center to the middle of the nightmarish alley. A frightened moan escaped from his lips and echoed in the surrounding silence. There was nothing logical about this frightful place. For the first time in his life he was truly scared.

Then he began to hear a strange unearthly sound drifting towards him. It almost sounded like an organ grinder's hurdy-gurdy music but the melody had an unreal fever dream quality to it. The music came closer and closer until finally Anthony saw the black outline of a man slowly cranking his music box. He strained his eyes in a vain attempt to make out the stranger's features but only a silhouette was visible. He made no move towards Anthony, he just stood rooted in the filthy cement, turning his handle round and again. Something stirred on the man's shoulder; Anthony could just make out that it was some sort of an animal. The little creature hissed menacingly as it leapt from the organ grinder's shoulder. As it scrambled down the alleyway towards him, Anthony saw that the animal had once been a small monkey. The hideous little thing smelled horrid. Its flesh was rotting and putrid. Its demonic eyes glowed white, writhing maggots swarmed over the surface of its body. The disgusting little beast skidded to a halt a few inches from Anthony's feet, waving its arm back and forth excitedly. Clutched in its tiny decaying hand was a small folded piece of paper. Anthony wanted to turn and flee from the disgusting little monster but found himself quite unable to do so. Against his will he reached down for the folded note and as soon as his fingers made contact with the waxy yellowing parchment he began to hear a deafening high pitched whine.

He awoke, gasping for air as he sat up in his bed. The morning sun shined brightly through his bedroom window, warming his skin. The racket that rang in his ears was nothing more than his alarm clock. He slammed his palm down on the snooze button and smiled gratefully. It had been nothing but an extremely vivid nightmare. His smirk did not last very long as he felt something in his hand. He did not want to look at the unknown object but could not fight the compulsion to do so. He unclenched his fist and saw to his horror that it was the same note that the terrible rotting monkey had passed to him. He un-balled the yellowing piece of paper. Scrawled across the surface in strange childish writing were two sentences. "What you have sought to conceal will be brought to light. Long dead hands will seek you out. "

The color drained from his face as he read the cryptic message over and over again. His mind raced as he leapt from bed. His eyes were drawn to the calendar that hung on the bedroom wall and he looked at the date, October 13th. A sad smile crossed his lips, he had nearly forgotten. How

could something that held such deep significance to him almost have slipped his mind completely? He looked down at the note in his hand, the horrid dream, the message all made sense to him now. He must have somehow written it in his sleep. It was nothing more than a product of his guilty conscience. He sat down on the edge of his bed and let out a sigh of relief, confident that his chain of reasoning was sound. After all, what other explanation could there be: vengeful spirits from the grave? He sneered at the mere thought. He reached over for his cell phone on the nightstand and dialed the district office, informing them that he was ill and that they would have to send out a substitute teacher to take over his twelfth grade science class.

He then tossed his phone on the bed and began to dress. He wasn't the slightest bit sick but he couldn't abide the thought of spending the day with the vacant-eyed cretins that he laughingly referred to as his students. Today was special and he wanted to be with the only person that he had ever loved.

He exited his apartment and drove to his mother's storage space where he kept his departed father's things. Unbeknownst to anyone but himself, he stored a keepsake of his own there as well. He removed the padlock and shut the door behind him, leaving himself in complete darkness. Although it was utterly black inside he knew just where the camping lantern was. He had spent many, many hours here. He knew every inch of the cramped storage space like the back of his own hand. He flipped the switch and the room was bathed in pale yellow light. Nothing was out of place but then again why would it have been? Nobody ever came here but him. He shoved two rows of boxes aside, revealing his most precious possession. He removed the red satin sheet that protected it from dirt and dust.

To the casual observer it was just an ordinary specimen skeleton of the type that could be found in any high school or college science room but to him it was all that remained of his lost love, Charlotte. She was seventeen and perfect, the moment she had walked into his classroom he knew he had to have her. It did not matter that if he dared to touch her he would lose his job or possibly even go to prison. He had to run his hands through her straw colored hair, feel his lips against her soft white skin.

One day after classes had ended he had made up a flimsy excuse for her to stay after school. When he had tried to kiss her she had tried to pull

away from him then started to scream, oh how she had screamed. He could still hear it echoing in his mind whenever it was quiet enough. He hadn't meant to kill her but she would just not stop; all that goddamn noise. He had been left with a terrible predicament what to do with her limp and lifeless body. It would have been a sin to destroy something so exquisite entirely. He had to keep her with him always. He had carefully dismembered her corpse and had filled the classroom sink with acid that he had on hand for experimental purposes. After her perfect flesh had been dissolved he had taken her bones back to his place in a gym bag.

The whole town had turned out to search for the missing girl. He had even participated in the effort. She was never found and no one ever suspected that Mr. White, the much respected educator, could be responsible for her disappearance. After things had quieted down he had spent days reassembling and wiring poor Charlotte's skeleton back together again. It had not been an easy task but it had been well worth the effort.

At first he had regretted ending Charlotte's life but eventually he had come to the realization that it had all been for the best. Now they could be together forever. Anthony took a hold of her dead lifeless hand and began to relive all the magical moments that they had spent together over the last three years. His reminiscences were suddenly disrupted when he felt Charlotte's skeletal fingers tighten around his hand. Her grip had the force of a vise. All the color drained from Anthony's face as he heard his own bones shatter with a loud crack.

Charlotte's jaw fell open with a quick snap. Her skull began to impossibly emit the same piercing death scream that he recalled so vividly. The fearful wailing grew in volume and intensity until his eardrums burst and blood trickled down unto his shoulders. She released her grip on his tortured hand and wrapped her yellowing bony fingers around his throat. As Charlotte's hands cut into his flesh, everything around him began to grow dim. A smile crept across his lips; he knew his death was not the end but the beginning. Charlotte would be waiting for him on the other side and they would be together for all time.

It was all he had ever wanted.

ANOTHER DAY IN THE PARK

Ken Goldman

*Life goes full circle sometimes –
But you don't always expect to find the same person at the end...*

A young mother pushing a baby carriage on a warm spring day...

Inside the small buggy an adorable infant dressed in blue, gurgling with delight...

Impossible not to feel your heart grow warm at the sight. Impossible not to feel your lips curl into a smile seeing it. And impossible for a total stranger not to notice the young woman's absolute joy and to make conversation with her.

The elderly woman could not resist. "He's beautiful," she said, reaching to touch the infant's soft cheek. "How old?" It was the question people always asked first, but Rita didn't mind.

"Five months this week. Happiest five months of my life, even if I haven't slept a wink."

The old woman laughed.

"I can see your happiness just looking at you. You're positively radiant! Is he your first?" That was the second question people asked.

"Yes. My husband and I are hoping for maybe three. And this little guy is just as smart as a whip too. Knows his own name when he hears it. Don't you, Stevie? Don't you, honey doll?"

Little Stevie certainly did. He offered a wide and bold grin for all the world to see. The old woman laughed at the sight.

"Oh, he's a smart one, all right, this one!"

Rita's pride showed. "We're talking surgeon material here. My husband and I already have begun putting the money aside for his medical school. Would you like to hold the future Dr. Lester?"

Now the grey-haired woman offered a wide grin. "Oh, may I? It's been so long. I'm a grandmother myself, you know. But the children have

grown to that difficult age and they don't like any family member touching or kissing them. You know how teenagers are."

"I only know how I was. But I suppose I'll be learning soon enough." Bundling Stevie in her arms, Rita wiped some gunk from his mouth and handed the infant to the woman. "Funny, I used to think trying to make it into the Olympics swimming competition was the most important thing in my life. Now the only thing that matters in my world is this little guy."

The old woman held the small blue bundle close to her. Instinctively she began gently to rock him while she hummed some tuneless song. "You have to appreciate every second while they're this young. It's over so quickly, you know. Sooner than anyone realizes. Holding her own baby has got to be the most wonderful pleasure life has to offer a woman, wouldn't you say?"

"No argument there."

"Life itself seems so brief. I suppose you have to get to my age to realize it. Of course, by then it's too late."

Rita nodded politely. "I suppose so."

The two women passed a pleasant few minutes before Rita mentioned it was time for Stevie's afternoon feeding. With obvious reluctance the old woman handed the infant back to its mother, her flickering smile suggesting a trace of sadness.

"Thank you ... I don't know your name."

"It's Rita. Rita Lester." She offered her hand.

"Well, thank you, Rita. I'm Emily O'Brien. I'm sure I'll be seeing the two of you in the park some time again." Still smiling, Emily went back to her bench.

Rita swiveled Stevie's carriage and disappeared down the path.

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A middle aged son pushed his elderly mother's wheelchair along the park's promenade. In the wheelchair a very old woman sat silently, her slight smile suggesting she enjoyed the warmth of the April sun.

Another woman, seeming as old but clearly in better health, approached them.

"That's very admirable of you, young man. A son should always be devoted to his mother. How old is she?"



The man managed a smile. "Ninety-one last November. She was an incredible woman, my mother. You can't tell by seeing her now, but she used to be a fantastic swimmer. Olympic material, I'm told. Rita Daniels, that was her maiden name. She was in the papers all the time. But she married my father and gave it up to raise my two sisters and me. Isn't that right, Mom?"

The elderly woman in the chair seemed to recognize her son's voice. She smiled again, made a gurgling sound.

"Odd, isn't it?" the son added. "A woman pushes her infant's baby carriage through the park on a beautiful day like today and decades later her son returns the favor."

"Except that's not a baby carriage you're pushing, is it?"

"Hardly. Life is funny, isn't it? We enter this world with no hair or teeth and that's pretty much the way we leave it."

"You can add to that how babies and we old 'uns also occasionally pee our pants."

They both laughed. The woman in the wheelchair smiled too. That brought smiles all around.

"You can see she knows we're talking about her," the woman said. "Seems there's a lot happening inside your mother that time hasn't taken from her."

"Yes, the dementia hasn't progressed so far that she's lost all her awareness. Mom still recognizes me when I come to visit, although the nurses at the home say she keeps pretty quiet the rest of the time. She's become very withdrawn since my father died. Sad, because she was the most sociable woman I've ever known. She must have had a hundred close friends. They're all gone now."

"Age can be cruel like that. You watch so many people leave you. I doubt a single day goes by that I don't think about the loved ones I miss."

The man smiled, offered the woman his hand. "I'm Steven. Dr. Steven Lester."

She took his hand in hers. He was startled by its coldness.

"Hello, Steven. I'm Emily O'Brien."

## ASKING FOR HELP

*Art Wester*

*'Help' is something it isn't always good to give,  
even if someone has come back for it...*

He'd never thought ghosts were any more than quiet thumps and blurry maybe-voices until one asked him for help.

Anderson Landers, 19, editor, main contributor and head investigator for GRAY AREA magazine, crammed the file back into the drawer and felt as if he'd never find a way out of his personal ring of Hell. "It's hopeless." He shoved the drawer shut, then kicked the file cabinet.

"You've got to learn to settle down." Mylo, across the room, paused and set down a tea service on a silver tray. He was 19 too, but had more developed ideas about life's little niceties. "Come sit at your desk and relax, enjoy some tea. You can tell me what to look for."

"If I can't find it, it's not here. Was here, isn't now. Things move around on me."

"Poltergeists?" Mylo laughed.

"Probably stolen. They're always creepy-crawling us, the bastards." Anderson went to his desk and plopped down, then tried some tea. Chamomile, sweetened with honey, delighted his tongue. Looking up, he found Mylo gazing patiently at him. He sighed. "I know, I know. The FBI doesn't care about the likes of us. Look, I'm trying to find the file on DuBois, the one with the pictures of that, you know..."

"Oh, yes, I remember. Little furry thing." Mylo went to the cabinet and came back with a file.

Anderson gaped for a moment, then shook his head. "You had it misfiled?"

"You did, honey." Mylo smiled and walked out.

Anderson watched him go, then opened the file and set down his cup of tea. There they were, the pictures of DuBois holding the creature he'd found in the mountains. "I'll be damned." It sure looked real. It even

looked alive. Big dark eyes, claws and dark fur. It looked like a ground hog except for the leathery wings. "Flying monkey my ass, there's no tail."

Anderson reached for the telephone to call his boss, the publisher, really his ex-high school science teacher, who funded the small press publication using a modest inheritance. "Pete? Anderson, yeah. I've got a story for this month's GREY AREA, the monkey-bat thing. Full feature, with four-color -- huh? You don't? But it's a good stor-- Oh, really? You're kidding, when?" He grabbed a pen and made some notes. "Yeah, changes things, all right. Okay, I'm on it. Give me that address again." He corrected a number and nodded. "Yeah, bye." He hung up and shouted, "Mylo? You up for a drive this evening?"

Mylo popped his head back into the room. "Where?"

"A haunting in Breezeville. Pete thinks it might be a lead article."

Mylo smiled and his fingers appeared around the door frame. "Only if you drive. My dad's still working on my car."

"I guess my junker will make the trip."

"Oh, and if we can eat out."

Anderson smiled. "I know just the place."

~~~~~

They dined early with the old folk' crowd in an antique-cluttered restaurant Anderson had investigated a couple years earlier. "Seems a ghost kept making water drip from that chandelier and also occasionally threw glasses from the shelves behind the bar," he told Mylo as they finished their coffee.

"Doesn't surprise me things fly around and fall," Mylo said. "Even the tables are rickety here."

They paid, ignored the looks they got from a few of the old men as they walked out, resisted the urge to hold hands or smooch just to rile the old darlings, then drove to a farmhouse just outside the old town. Old, old, old; an antique meal eaten while crowded by antiques, both alive and otherwise, had left Mylo feeling a tad creaky himself, but he tried to shake it off.

The car bumped over a dirt driveway. A big mutt came trotting out of a barn and cocked its head at them, baying once before going back into shadows.

Anderson shivered. "I refuse to start thinking of Cujo."

Mylo laughed. "Or Deliverance."

"Lonely place, isn't it?"

Mylo rolled his eyes. "Can't wait to see if the ghosts are wearing bib overalls."

"Inbred ghosts. Pete'll love that angle."

"We're too cruel."

"By half." Anderson stopped the car beside a rusted-out pickup truck and popped the door. "Want to wait here?"

"Hell no." Mylo popped open his door too and they walked up to the house. Three scrawny chickens clucked at their ankles, almost tripping them.

Anderson knocked and Mylo took a couple pictures with the digital camera, hoping for orbs. None showed on the screen but he kept the pictures anyway, for background.

Footsteps rattled the house, then the door creaked open. A barely-illuminated face mooned at them, gazing up. "Yes? You from the magazine?"

"Gray Area, yes, ma'am. Name's Anderson Landers and this is Mylo, my partner."

"Well come on in, then." An old woman was revealed as the door swung open wider. She had white hair that needed brushed and wore a floral print dress and pink fuzzy slippers. Her glasses sat crooked, black plastic frames tilted to the left.

As she came through the door, Mylo squatted down a bit and took a picture of the old woman straight on. She smiled obligingly after the flash.

Anderson moved into a kitchen that smelled of cabbage and laundry. "I understand you've been having some experiences you'd like us to investigate, is that right?"

The floorboards creaked and moved underfoot. Linoleum curled on the chipped surface of the table. A naked bulb hung over it all.

The old woman marched to the sink, where a stack of dishes soaked in suds. She turned to face her guests. "Don't know nothin' about experiences but I got me a god-damned ghost won't let me be. Pest me somethin' awful." She looked Landers up and down, sniffed. "You gonna chase it for me?"

"Well, ma'am, I'll surely try if you want me to."

“You done this kinda work before, then?” The old woman’s eyes, magnified by her glasses, now looked both Anderson and Mylo up and down as if sizing them up, maybe for a meal.

Shifting foot to foot, Anderson glanced at Mylo, who was photographing some crockery on a hutch. Antiques, he figured. “My partner will take some pictures, if you don’t mind.” The old woman nodded. “Just so’s I see em before you print em up in that magazine uh yours.”

Anderson nodded. She was astute. “I’ve got a release form right here, ma’am.” He unfolded it and set it on the kitchen table. “It gives you right of refusal.” “I ain’t signin nothin’, young man. Don’t hold with them lawyer words and phrases.” She marched to the table, picked up the paper, and looked it over. “Can’t make sense uh this a’ tall, so tell you what.” She stuck out her hand. “You look me in the eye and shake my hand and we’ll call it square.”

He shook her hand. Soft skin over hard muscles and knobby bones, cold from lack of circulation, he noticed. Reminded him of his great-grandmother. Mylo stepped up and shook hands, too.

“Now, ma’am, can you show me where the ghost has been, uh, making itself known?” Anderson’s nerves showed.

The old woman smiled. Her teeth seemed sharp, pointed. Then her skin faded from pink to gray to faintly green.

Anderson frowned, staring.

Warts appeared and from them sprouted hairs as thick as talons. They rippled, as if straining to touch him.

Anderson winced, scooting back while beside him Mylo gaped.

The old woman moaned. She transformed liquidly into a creature from nightmares untold, flame in her eyes, a scent of brimstone coming off her, fur bristling in all wrong places.

Anderson could not make sense of what he was seeing. It was as if he could only see her a part at a time. He was terrified, his fingers digging into his own thighs as his legs refused to move him.

The old woman spoke. “Making myself known? Right here, young man.” She laughed again, much louder, opening her mouth wide to show fangs. Wisps of vapor curled at the back of her throat. Tendrils slithered from her nostrils to swirl around her head.

Anderson whimpered.

Mylo raised the camera.

The old woman was not there anymore. She'd vanished, blinked off like a TV in a power outage.

Trembling, Anderson glanced at his partner. "Tell me you got pictures."

Mylo sighed. "She was too quick. Freaked me out."

"Great." Anderson's fear drained into disappointment. He slipped an arm around Mylo's shoulders for a brief hug, just to touch something real. He realized they hadn't captured any evidence whatsoever even though he'd shaken her hand. "This is a bust." Once again it would be his word against reason and rationality. "It's always this way."

"Now now, be brave." Mylo moved across the kitchen and stuck a finger into the dishwater. "Fresh suds and the water's still warm." He glanced toward the doorway leading deeper into the house. "Think there are any actual people around here?"

He was clearly thinking setup, Anderson knew. It wouldn't be their first time being hoaxed. They were mocked and worse by skeptibunkers, bashers and outright haters. Skepdicks, they called the lot of them.

"Hello?" Anderson called out as loudly as he could. He heard the big dog baying outside again. He shrugged. "If they're here, they're not answering." Usually, debunkers and practical jokers couldn't wait to pop out and scoff. And the other type, well, they usually had baseball bats and barbed attitudes and it was more about harming body than spirit.

Anderson felt uneasy. "Think we should poke around? Or is this breaking-and-entering now?" He imagined himself telling a cop that a ghost had let him in and shuddered.

"Abandoned farmhouses don't have working water heaters. Or chickens, for that matter."

Anderson walked to the sink, then smiled. "You're presuming too much. Look at this."

It was empty now, stained, with a dusty spider webs trailing from faucet to drain. No suds, no water, warm or otherwise.

Mylo held up a finger, which was still damp.

They frowned.



On the ride back home, Mylo remembered the picture of the old woman taken when they'd first entered. He checked the screen and sure enough, there it was. "We may have something." There were also pictures of the hutch with the antique crockery and one long shot of Anderson talking to the old woman as she stood near the suds-filled sink.

Was she just slightly translucent?

"Turn around, we have to go back."

Anderson slowed by taking his foot off the accelerator. "Why? You forget something?" Equipment was expensive.

Mylo laughed. "Only to take the After shots."

"As in Before and After?"

"Yep. I've got the old woman and the room as we first found it. With some comparison shots of how it really looks, we can prove we didn't hallucinate."

He swerved into a farmer's lane and did a U-turn, saying, "Okay, but people will just say we reversed the order or faked it somehow. That's what they always say."

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While Mylo took more pictures, Anderson set up passive electromagnetic sensors to record fluctuations in the background EM. He placed them both inside and outside the old farmhouse. The last thing he did was place a voice-activated digital tape recorder on the table near the middle of the room. It would come on and record any sounds, including voices, in the otherwise empty room. They both left as quietly as possible.

"You're doing EVP?" Mylo asked, once outside. He wasn't big on EVP, or Electronic Voice Phenomena, feeling it was likely just a Rorschach test for the ears, where people heard snatches of words and phrases because they wanted to. Matrixing, some called it, or pareidolia. Besides, some disembodied half-voice would creep him out, especially on top of what he'd seen.

"Well, she obviously came back so solidly to tell us something; maybe she'll take the hint." Anderson hoped so. "We'll know tomorrow morning."

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They stayed in Breezeville at a bed and breakfast inn supposedly haunted by the scent of roses in the winter. It wasn't winter and they smelled only the rose water left in the wash basins. They were more haunted by the accusing looks the innkeeper's husband gave his wife when she agreed to rent the room to two young guys who called themselves life partners.

It was not their first time together out of their respective homes but both were kind of nervous anyway. The scowls didn't help their nerves settle any more than the horrifying transformation they'd seen.

They giggled, though, once in the room, and imagined hubby's lecture as wifey cringed and nodded and ignored him, as usual.

"They're more haunted by us," Mylo said.

"Well sure, us teenagers are terrifying."

They left a note thanking the innkeeper for her hospitality, folded on the dresser, a nice tip to go with it.



Mylo spent the next morning at the small town's historical society seeking information on who'd owned the farm and what they'd looked like. It was Anderson, though, working in the local newspaper's archives at the public library, who found a photograph of the old woman. She'd been known as Aunt Maude and had been well-known for her preserves and pies, which brought in ribbons and prizes each year at county and state fair competitions.

Maude Bently supplied homemade pies to the local diner and several local restaurants to supplement her meager social security money. Her husband, Herb, had died in an accident when his tractor was clipped by a semi racing too fast along the state route that cut through the Bently farm. He'd been scurrying along the side of the road at twenty mph, moving from field to field to get the plowing done.

There was a sentence or two hinting that some of the local kids were cruel to her, especially during Hallowe'en, calling her an old witch, toilet-papering her trees and soaping her windows; typical mischief with deep-rooted social ostracizing as its foundation. Anderson and Mylo knew about such forces and pitied the old woman for the fear she must have felt.

“Maude Bently, where did you learn that Hallowe’en trick?” Anderson muttered, carrying a photocopy of the article, with its nice big pixelated picture of Maude holding a pie and smiling her charming old woman’s smile.

The article had appeared on the occasion of Maude’s death, seven years ago.

Mylo, thrilled, held the picture up beside his camera’s tiny review screen, then asked the librarian where he might find a certain piece of computer equipment. In lieu of a photo shop, they were directed to the WE-WRAP-YOU-SEND store in a strip mall beside a feed store at one end of town.

Mylo uploaded the digital pictures, printed them out and held the one he’d first taken of the old woman beside the photocopy of the newspaper picture. “It’s Maude, all right.”

“Now let’s get out to the farm and check the equipment. If it fleshes out right, Pete’s gonna love it.”

~~~

Consulting his notebook, Anderson, with Mylo’s help, retrieved the outdoor EM sensors, some of which showed they’d recorded something. “I should’ve left a video camera; we probably would’ve gotten ghost lights, if not another full-body apparition. Man, she was so real.”

“She was real; she just came for a visit. Come on.” Mylo was at the front door, opening it.

Anderson went with Mylo into the gloomy, dusty interior. The first thing he noticed was the voice-activated tape recorder lying on its side. He’d left it standing upright. Thick dust on the table showed no rat footprints or any other disturbance near the machine.

Mylo grabbed the other EM sensors, all of which showed they’d been activated.

Anderson held up the recorder. “There’s some tape used.” He used out-dated terms for his digital recorder but knew how to operate it expertly. He hit play.

Hissing sounded, then a low thump, which repeated three times. This was followed by a low moan. A muffled exchange, as if a man and woman were talking, came next. “Can’t make it out,” Anderson said.

Mylo shushed him and cocked an ear closer. "They're arguing over asking for help. He's saying they need to do things on their own the way they've always done." He listened harder. "She says they need help."

Anderson felt goose bumps.

Then, very clearly on the tape, an old woman's voice said, "Look at me. Help us. Where can we go?"

"Oh man, that's crystal clear." Anderson rewound it and played it again, nearly dancing up and down as he laughed in his excitement.

Mylo, however, frowned. "They need release."

"They're earth-bound spirits, you mean?"

Mylo looked around. "I think they spent too much time cooped up here and don't know anything different. They're so proud, too. Independent. Think how much asking help cost her in pride, after a lifetime of independence. She could probably only do it 'cause she got out more, sold her pies in town. We've got to do something for them."

Anderson's laughter withered. "So what are we supposed to do, burn the place down?"

Mylo shrugged and put his hands into his pockets, a posture he often assumed when pacing. He hunched his shoulders, took a few steps, then froze. He pulled a hand from a pocket and showed Anderson a book of matches, a look of revelation on his face. Anderson gave him a look of worry and Mylo smiled big and shrugged. "What if I just leave these matches in there? Just lay them on the kitchen counter by the sink and walk away?"

Anderson went back in with him to make sure Mylo didn't strike a match. He watched his partner place the matchbook on the counter. "Here's a way out," Mylo said loudly, clearly. "Here's the key."

They left the old house, had some lunch, then returned to the B&B. As they packed, they heard sirens wailing in the town. Leaving their thank-you note and tip, they scrambled for their car to race the fire trucks to the scene of the fire, knowing it just had to be Maud's place. "She used the way out," Mylo said.

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On the cover of GRAY AREA magazine the next month was a picture of an old farmhouse burning out-of-control in the midst of barren fields. In the

billowing smoke could be seen the shapes of two old faces.

Both were smiling. A hand was raised, palm out, beside the woman's face. She was waving a thank-you.

"No," Anderson said on the phone to his publisher, "I swear we didn't Photoshop those pictures."

Mylo just shook his head and smiled, sipping tea. It didn't matter to him if anyone believed it or not, he had helped Maud and her beloved husband out of a jam. He felt great.

BACK FROM THE DEAD

Ash Hartwell

*Beware the arrangements made before someone dies ...
You don't know if they will come back...*

I only have distant memories of the funeral. There'd been a nice eulogy from an old friend and some rocking tunes; I chose them myself to reflect my life and, from what I could tell, it all went very well, with the one obvious exception that the hostess wasn't there. I always prided myself on being the life and soul of the party and this was the party to end all parties, my final curtain call and I'd missed it. Being dead can really cramp a girl's social life.

But I'm not dead. I was when they buried me, but I'm not now, not exactly.

As I lie here now shrouded in my eternal darkness, the fluid in my eyes having long since evaporated away, I await my return. The expensive Haitian bokor I charged with my resurrection must have already begun the process as I'm beginning to become aware; aware of my body and its decay, aware of my desire to return to the living world for one more night. Not that money matters to me now as I certainly have no use for material wealth, but it would be money well spent if I got my revenge.

I can feel my arm twitching, only a little but it's definitely moving. It did it again, but with more purpose this time and then my legs start moving up and down, slowly at first, as if I'm walking on the spot. Once again I lay still, entombed in my six by three cell deep in the earth, but I can wait. Time has no relevance to me, a few minutes, an hour, an eternity. I'm in no hurry.

My thin bony fingers begin slowly curling into tight fists and my arms bend at the elbow, then steadily I begin punching the coffin lid, each blow getting harder and faster. My arms become pistons, pounding on the cushioned wood until eventually it begins to give, a thin trickle of earth falling on my face like grains of sand in an hour glass. Then, without

warning, the wood shatters and clumps of wet mud fall in on me as I struggle to sit up against the oppressive weight of the soil above me.

In life I generally tried avoiding dirt with its tendency to ruin expensive clothing but now I'm oblivious to the filthy wet mud sucking me down. I'm oblivious to the worms and insects crawling into my mouth and nose as I pull myself upwards like a drowning man swimming towards the surface, driven not by the need for air in a final valiant struggle for survival, but by revenge. Powered relentlessly onwards by the bokor controlling my body.

My hand breaks the surface, clawing at the cold air, searching for grip. My legs still propel me upwards, my arms, now free of the earth, flail wildly, trying to keep the momentum going. The topsoil lifts in great clods as my head and shoulders push through the narrow opening I created. Then my face reaches the surface, the soil pulling at my long hair as if Hades itself is making one last, desperate attempt to pull me back into the inferno. My hands dig into the wet grass of the cemetery lawn as I pull myself across the ground, dragging my legs free of the pit.

Exactly a year after they thought their troubles were dead and buried; trouble has raised her ugly, rotting head.

It's raining but as I lie face down on the damp grass, I feel nothing. I could neither smell the grass's sweet aroma nor feel the raindrops' gentle sting. These things were brutally stolen from me when greed twisted the souls of those who loved me. I was aware of their plotting and, having never been accepted into the family I knew, when my beloved William died, leaving his fortune to me, that my life was in danger. His spiteful sisters thought I'd somehow cheated them out of what was rightfully theirs. Of course I'd taken precautions to protect myself but should that fail, I'd also planned my revenge, a revenge which is now underway.

My feet slip as I attempt to stand, sending me crashing face first into a nearby gravestone. I try again, leaving a clump of shriveled dry scalp and several fragments of skull sticking to the ornate masonry. This time my bokor does a better job of manipulating my spindly limbs and I'm soon stumbling unsteadily across the cemetery, heading to what should still have been my house.

The bokor had done her research well, guiding me carefully through the quiet dark streets, just another drunk weaving her way home. Before long I'm stumbling through the gates and across the old suburban mansion's

well-kept lawns. My instructions to her during my visit to Haiti had been to ensure William's sisters would get to see me one last time and that time had come. I hope I look presentable in my smart mud-stained burial suit with its large rip from shoulder to breast pocket. My brittle, unkempt hair is plastered with mud and I have a gaping hole in my forehead just above my empty eye sockets. The dried out skin is drawn back, causing my lips to crack and making my teeth protrude in a permanently sick smile and I strongly suspect I have the alluring smell of rotting flesh, with a maybe a hint of embalming fluid.

I stand on my front porch, reaching up to knock several times on the door. After a few minutes I sense the two sisters fumbling with the door latch. The external light above my head illuminates my ghastly appearance as the door creaks open and the bokor propels my decaying corpse forward.

I am back from the dead and their terrified screams are my exquisite revenge.

A HORRIBLE EXPERIMENT

Shawna Rand

Should anyone interfere with the dead?

I've just read the St. Louis newspaper and am in complete shock at the article I've come across titled, A Horrible Experiment. This article, dated today, September 17, 1870 reads: "Sometime last winter a man named John H. Skaggs was convicted of murder in Missouri and sentenced to be hung. The sentence was recently carried into effect at Jackson."

I remember that day; it was August 26th. I was there. And yes, it was a horrible experiment. I watched John H. Skaggs hang in Bloomfield, Missouri. The newspaper says: "We omit all details, except to say that the hanging was badly done and the neck of the culprit was not broken.

He was strangled and after hanging thirteen minutes, was pronounced dead and taken down. Then the doctors took him and undertook to restore life with a powerful galvanic battery."

In other words, the doctors were doing necromancy, witchcraft. Trying to play God.

I remember them rushing John Skaggs into the courthouse to try and bring him back to life with horrible machines and other methods. I have seen some disturbing things in my life, but nothing like I'd seen while working as a maid in the courthouse that day. I, Anna Greenfield, can live to tell you that this was by far the worst and I have not slept right since.

Before the incident, I had read Mary Shelley's 'Frankenstein' which I found in the local library, a haunting tale of creating a life from dead body parts and then giving that body life. Then I witnessed before me, a real account of men who I knew, men I worked for, attempting a similar feat—in real life. Is galvanizing dead bodies a new fad or has this been going on in some form or another for all of time and never documented as it is now? Whether fictional or real, this is not a topic to be brushed aside.

Even the Sheriff of Stoddard County, Col. George W. Kitchen, had lost control of the situation. I remember that cold hard table and how news

reporters stood around watching and recording the event play by play in their notebooks as I worked to assist the doctors without knowing this was going to take place. If I had known this was going to happen, I would have fled this town for good long before then.

I wanted to scream, I wanted to run, but I acted as though it was no big deal. I was acting, of course; if I had made a fuss, heaven knows what they might have done to me. Those doctors were respected in our town: Dr. Jackson, Dr. Sanders and Dr. McDonald, yet, they became monsters before my very eyes. I had to be on their team for my own safety. The Sherriff told them to stop but they resisted. They had all gone mad, thinking they could play God.

They did not take much notice of me anyway; it was as if I was part of the furniture. I just did what they asked me to do. Mostly, my job was to bring the materials for their experiment and to clean up their mess afterwards: maid of the courthouse, maid of the dead; and suddenly a lab assistant for mad doctors. They must have thought because I was a woman and a maid, it wouldn't matter what they did in front of me. I was just there to do as I was told and to keep quiet.

Now, a year later, the news article talks about the hanging—or execution—and how it took place and what they did to his body, and I am thrust back in time.

John Skaggs keeps haunting me to this day. I have nightmares and often wake in a cold sweat. I cannot see him in my dreams, but I feel as though someone is there with me and then the dream and the sensation fades away. Every time.

I went in and out of that room bringing food and water to the doctors among other things they requested. I knew what they were doing was wrong and so did the sheriff, but they kept going. At the same time, I wondered if they could really revive this dead man; stop death in its tracks using this criminal, John Skaggs, to experiment on.

The article goes on:

“The experiment took place at about one o'clock pm and the experiment for resurrection continued until four o'clock the next morning, often with appearance of success. The narrative contains a minute account of the phenomena produced, hour by hour; but it is too horrible to copy. We give a sample.

Skaggs' tongue is held to permit him to breathe.

2:40. The legs which had been spread wide open upon the bench, close suddenly. Violent muscular motion. Breathing. The tongue is swelling and a piece of wood is inserted in between the teeth to keep the mouth open. The tongue is held by forceps.

3:05. The right leg moves on the table like that of a clog dancer. There are more signs of life than there were half an hour ago.

3:08. Left arm swings around like a pugilist throwing off a blow. His limbs move violently and he has the appearance of a strong man in a terrible dream.

4:20. Perspiration improving. Feet not at all cold. The body is rubbed with whiskey.

4:25. Less atmospheric pressure. Pulse 75 per minute and weak.

And so on through the night.”

“The physicians had been operating upon him to nearly 9 o’clock in an endeavor to resuscitate him. The attempt was given up as hopeless. Dr. Sanders was the first to desist, then Dr. McDonald and finally Dr. Jackson. It was 9 o’clock when Sherriff Kitchen left him. Skaggs was then breathing heavily as if asleep. Some minutes before this he was very weak, but had when the galvanic battery was not in operation, thrown his left arm over his breast and then by his side. The last action of the doctors was to examine Skaggs’ tongue and no sooner had Dr. McDonald done this than he picked up his hat and walked out. Skaggs was able to open and shut his eyes and, as the Sheriff stepped near the body, they followed him. They also followed the movements of E.S. Burts, who was in the room. It is perhaps fortunate for these gentlemen that they were almost expressionless, as if fixed in dull leaden stare. Three men remained by the body, as it lay on the bench in the dimly lighted room of the courthouse, and they watched it narrowly. Skaggs seemed to gain strength, but after midnight his breathing was very labored.”

I remember they just kept going and going until his tongue was black. He was beyond dead, but they still thought they could bring him back. I was disturbed and repulsed as they were far beyond reason. They were insane. I had to get out of this town; I realized this as soon as this situation took place.

Reading this horrific play-by-play brings me back to those moments and of those terrible things that the story did not even speak of. What they thought was a miraculous thing to do was gruesome and disgusting. I was

the one who was asked to rub his body with whiskey. They were trying to use electricity, or galvanize him much like Victor Frankenstein did with his “creation”.

After this terrible day, I left town and did not look back. I knew that they would continue with this practice with other bodies, and I wanted no part in it. Even though I am free of ever seeing them or working for them again, the terrible events follow me everywhere I go.

I imagine this would lead to more experiments. No doubt, there would be others. I witnessed something truly awful. How could they get away with this? How could this be happening in the United States of America? How?

Immortality. Is it real? Can we make it real?

What if he did come back to life? A convicted criminal. What then? Would he be a monster? Would he kill them all for torturing him so?

Electrical experiments. Galvanizing. Awful. Just horrendous. Who do they think they are? They would have been burned at the stake for such conjuring back in the day, for witchcraft, or sorcery.

And I remember that haunting moment when John Skaggs body was worked over.

He never talked, but he did make a sound, “Owwwwwweooooou”. I wonder if it was from those electrical currents they put into him, or if he was really brought back to life?

I believe it was his soul crying out for them to stop.

He never spoke after he was hanged. The only noise he made were the odd sounds that I witnessed, like he was a ghoul. But in my dreams, he keeps coming back to life. He doesn’t die.

DEAD CIRCLE

Ron Koppelberger

If you really want to stop things coming back, you should not meddle...

Wavering strands of green and yellow seaweed reached from around the edges of the stone circle. The stones were a greenish hue with tiny bits of bright red coral covering the deep recesses between each section of the circle. Distant from the thriving port city of St. Nathan, the stones were a dark portal to another time, a time when ancient sailing vessels and pirates scouted the waters off the coast. The designs inscribed upon the surface of the stones were an arcane message to the wont of those who might find the need to open unbidden secrets, to the wont of searchers and treasure hunters alike.

Nate Dove swam in slow lazy circles around the circle of inscribed granite; his scuba tank had forty-five minutes left in it and he wanted to mark the spot for future explorations. He had searched for the massive granite circle most of his life, the portal for dark dreamers and the gods of ash and blood. Nate touched the surface of one of the stones, it was warm to the touch and beneath the surface a hum, a vibration, like a heartbeat throbbing with the pulse of the ocean and all the clandestine whispers of another age. A shadowy embrace enveloped him as he pressed his hand against the inscriptions and he was transported to another time, another place closer to the eye of creation.

Images flashed before his eyes, great gushing torrents of lava and towering mountains of ash. In the vision he saw distant vistas near the coastline and old remnants of fire. A group of men on the beach line were cooking fish over an open flame. "Food for the angels," one of them said. The other man grunted and looked to the sea. "The stones will tell the beast to march." As Nate dreamed of the men his eyes saw and the knowledge they presented to him was a silhouette in terror, the beast the men spoke of stood from the ocean beds on two gigantic legs, as tall as a skyscraper. He

saw the men on the beach run and scream in terror as an enormous wave swallowed the tiny campfire and the beach line.

Nate shook his head in slow nods as he stared at the stones that formed the circle; it was dead, it had to be, he thought, a dead circle, dead creatures of old, he prayed.

The stones began to glow a pale red luminescence as he pried at a loose rock near the center of the circle. In that moment Nate saw the bodies; old, having died years and years ago, the men had perished at the hands of the monster. What had brought the monster to the surface, what had driven it to kill the men; the visions weren't answering his questions.

A deep rumbling sound came in waves beneath the surface of the ocean, deep within the ocean currents. Nate Dove pried at the stone in the center of the circle until it came loose. Tiny tendrils of silt and sand clouded the recess beneath the stone for a moment, then a flutter of gold. Nate reached down into the cavity and pulled out a long rope of gold with a medallion attached to it. Wiping the surface of the medallion clean, he studied it with an eager appreciation.

The opening in the circle began to glow red with a pulsing strobe-like rhythm and then a bright red liquid smoke began to pour from the opening in the gahnite. Nate tried to back away and found that he couldn't move, his oxygen tank had five minutes left and he began to panic, flailing wildly as he tried to escape the pull of the stones.

In a final attempt to break free, he put the necklace back into the opening and replaced the stone. The pulsing increased and the circle began to crumble, revealing plumes of crimson smoke. Nate screamed inside his mask and yanked free from the magnetic pull of the stones. He swam upwards, got to the edge of the speedboat and climbed in.

Nate jerked the mask from his face and cranked the engine, speeding in the opposite direction of the roiling waters. From a distance he looked backward and saw a giant shadow that climbed across the sun and threw him into its cool silhouette.

Nate considered the dream for a moment as he headed up the coast away from the approaching hand of fate. They had known and soon St. Nathan would know that the circle was indeed alive and the fates had a surprise in store for them.

BUCKET OF SALVATION

Michael B Fletcher

*Our future could lie in the hands of someone like this and we have to
hope
he is capable of coming back*

Raith squinted through the filters covering his eyes and the narrow viewports. The sweat prickling his forehead was more from imagination than actual heat but that didn't lessen the primal fear that shook his body.

His eyes scanned the instruments, all screaming at him from the red zone. The mouse threatened to slip under his sweaty palm but he allowed it to edge the pointer in a smooth arc over his flight path. Sure he didn't need it but he had to have some control, had to feel that technology didn't take all the decisions. The mouse, his one link to the archaic technology of the 21st Century allowed him that control, but it didn't still his fear.

A squeal started, heralding a vibration caused by gravitation exerting its iron grip on the ship's structure. Raith didn't need to hear it to know what was happening as the smooth surface of the ship rippled in reaction to the immense forces it was encountering, while keeping its vulnerable human cargo safe.

Soon, he thought, *soon*.

A rumble penetrated; familiar, but adding to his paranoia. 'Bloody K-H effect already,' he muttered, thinking briefly of those now long dead scientists, Kelvin and Helmholtz who gave their name to the solar winds and the reason he was here.

Raith looked at the temperature display: a balmy 30 degrees inside despite the state-of-the-art insulation, yet a mere 4000 degrees C outside. He chanced a look through the slit of the viewport. The flickering flames of the corona were already licking the ship, ready to toast this intruder as the temperatures rose. The interior of the ship seemed alive with flames coruscating in colours from golden, through red to the hottest of white.

He concentrated on the plotted elliptical path, knowing that the moment of release had to be precisely timed, for the super-strengthened platalloy would not take more than a moment or two to melt away in temperatures of the targeted coronal hole emitting the fast solar wind from the polar region of the sun.

His hand hovered over the button, relying on feel rather than computerised timing. Even the most advanced software failed to take in that extra element—the element of knowing precisely when the magnetic snare could be engaged. The factors affecting a successful snatch of ‘star stuff’, the molten plasma of the sun, could vary as easily as an unexpected flare or a variation of patterns within the solar wind. The human mind added just the extra factor that could mean the success or failure of the mission.

Now, his mind screamed, now!

His hand plunged down and the powerful engines fired the pulse deep into the coronal hole whose vortex drew a continuous stream of plasma from the surface, over a million kilometres below.

The ship shuddered, taking the strain as the magnetic field captured a ‘bucket’ of plasma and attempted to heave it from its source. Raith grimaced as he thought of a fisherman striking and reeling in his catch, but the stakes were much higher here. If he lost, he would pay the ultimate price.

The instruments showed that the capture had been successful and the ship’s engines immediately went to full power. The g-forces were exceptional despite the stasis field and Raith pulled with the ship, muscles straining, joints cracking. This was the moment. Would the power and planned trajectory enable them to break free with their cargo or would they be absorbed into the gigantic maelstrom below?

All monitors were flashing warning signs and indicators had moved beyond the red zone. The fight was at a standstill.

Raith’s eyes flashed around the cabin, briefly noticing the temperature standing at 35 degrees C while waiting for the inevitable slide back into the sun. He had one card to play, employing the comparatively minute power of the positional thrusters, normally only used in docking.

His hand snapped up to the panel and flicked the switch.

The temperature climbed. 40 degrees. He didn’t look at the outside temperatures.

Raith felt a slight give amongst the shuddering and flexing of the ship. Pressure started dropping, temperature rising.

Sweat sheened his eyeballs as he hazily registered the beginnings of a forward motion along the prescribed path whose trajectory slowly swung away from the sun.

He had no choice now. The mission had to succeed on its own. The human element could not survive with the increasing heat.

Raith took a final look through the viewport, closed his eyes and initiated the last sequence.

The dark cool didn't register at first. Sweat poured out of him, suit wringing wet: the babble of voices, a cold compress on his forehead and sweet fluid trickling down his throat.

'Unlimited power.' 'Plasma.' 'Sun.' Words trickled into his mind. Grinning faces above came slowly into focus. He felt pats on his shoulder, his hand being shaken.

He had succeeded. The colony would now have the power it needed to survive. And his etheraform had successfully returned to his body. It had been worth the years of planning and the technology that had been created to enable the mission to give hope for the future.

Raith felt an overwhelming satisfaction that his unique gift had allowed this to happen and a sadness that he wouldn't live to see the future he had created.

The pull on his etheraform became more noticeable, its substance thinning at the very moment of triumph. He fought briefly and then let it happen. It would be some moments before joyous people around him would notice he had gone, absorbed by what he had created.

COMING BACK HAIKU

Brian Barnett

*Coming back in many ways repeats itself and here is captured in a few
magical lines*

The Thumping Door

my grandpa wants in
again with the thumping door
alas, he is dead

Crows Scatter

the leaves tumble down
the crows scatter in a crowd
Samhain has come back

Mary Celeste Approaches

opaque fog rolls in
Mary Celeste approaches
she fades like a dream

Dirty Rebel Bones

dirty rebel bones
marching north toward the Yanks
the south rose again

MOUNTAINS OF THE DEAD

Michael Porter

*It should be written in stone in the mountainside...Beware what you
decide to investigate...
it could come back*

"How close are we?" The snow wasn't too bad right now. Yas Emerson could see the mountains pretty clearly in the distance. He lost his balance for a moment as his foot slipped along the base of one of the trees. The ice was pretty bad here, but they would be out in the open snow again before too long.

"Not far. We're about an hour from the pass. Perhaps we should camp here for the night." The guide, Max Sims, was in his late sixties and had lived around the northern Urals his entire life. Max repressed a laugh, watching this Native American from New York state stumble his way through the light snow on the round. By light snow, of course, Max meant that it was only up to their calves right now. For someone who had never had to experience being dug out of a snow bank, he supposed this seemed like a lot.

"I agree. It will give Marge and the rest of the team time to catch up."

Sims was already building the fire. "What exact part of the mountain were you aiming for again?"

"We need to hit slope 1079 for around an hour, then we can head back to Vizhai. This is the end of a long research project for me."

"Well that's fine. I must warn you, though, none of the locals will come near this place. Never did. Too many legends. Too many bad memories."

"That's essentially what we're studying."

In 1959 a skiing expedition had been wiped out in the same area. No one had ever figured out exactly why. Based on the evidence, most of the team had decided to venture into the freezing wastes, naked. Their tent was

completely shredded and there was evidence from the bodies that they had tried to climb trees to escape... something. They had tried until most of the skin was ripped off their hands. They were all found frozen.

Sims nodded as Emerson finished the story. It had grown dark as night descended. The beans he was cooking over the fire were almost ready. Steam and smoke surrounded them in an almost otherworldly mist. "Everyone already knows that story. There's been a ton of research done on it. So what's to study?"

Emerson rubbed his hands together. They would have to take to their tents soon. The cold was quickly lethal in this region. "Since they opened the Soviet Archives in the 90's, we've found that the incidents go back further than that. In 1943 an entire Soviet Tank battalion disappeared near the eastern slope of the mountain. Only their heavy equipment was recovered. Soviet high command sealed the records, removed all mention from the files outside the archive. In 1890 a large number of local children vanished from the surrounding settlements. Vizhai was actually a ghost town for around six months, everyone left. Six men who spent a night in the town to investigate were also found killed. I could hardly find any information about them, except that the seventh survivor spent the rest of his life in a madhouse. "

"Ok Agent Mulder, I get the point. Any other fun facts for me before we settle in for the evening, totally cut off from all help, alone in the endless dark?"

"Very funny."

After they ate the two men retired to their tents for the evening. The damn cold bled through everything. Emerson was used to camping, but this was different. When you were camping at night, you had to get used to all the sounds of things moving around the tent in the night. Here there was only perfect darkness and the endless howling of the wind.

In the pitch black night, something large moved.

Yas had gotten used to the sound of another man crunching his way through the snow. This was different, far bigger. His instincts told him to stick his head outside to try and get a look, see if Sims had heard the same thing, but he couldn't make himself do it. It was far too cold, far too dark. The fear paralyzed him like a child hiding under a blanket. His ears strained to hear anything else, but there was only the voice of the wind. Eventually he fell back asleep.

In the morning, Sims was gone.

"Max!!"

The tent was cut in half. There were no tracks or footprints, only a few drops of blood in the snow around where they had built the fire. There had been no noise. Emerson considered turning back; the authorities would have to be informed. Then reason set in. The rest of the team was coming with more supplies. He would wait.

Waiting was the worst. Thank god he had daylight to keep him company. In the distance, all he could see was rolling fields of white and the mountains. Only the howling of the wind kept him company. At one point he started to drift off, only to be woken by a man's scream.

Emerson snapped to full alertness just as the snowcat pulled up. Jennifer Collins was the first one to hop out. The young blond was like a stick, reminding Yas of his little sister. "Emerson, we have some thermoses..."

"Sims is gone. When I got up this morning he wasn't here. No sound. Nothing."

"Sims is gone. Great. Fucking awesome!!"

Troy Rickson was an unusual guy. Heavy set, long brown beard with a grey skunk line going down the middle of it. Troy was pissed about something, everyday, all the time. After a while it just became background noise for the rest of the team.

Collins was looking over the campsite. "Radio it in. We're going to have to head back. You've been out here all day, alone?"

"Ya. Didn't know what else to do."

Rickson was slamming on something in the snowcat, trying to get the engine to turn over. "Shit. Radio's dead. Engine won't start. We'll have to hike back to Vizhai. That's not good for Sims. By the time any authorities get out here, he'll have froze to death without supplies."

Emerson was rubbing his forehead. "Alright. It's too close to dark for us to leave now anyway. I say we use the remaining daylight to search, we set camp and we hike out of here at first light. As much as I love sticking around here, this plan makes the most sense."

Collins was already building the fire back up. "You really want us to start a search? We won't even be able to cover much ground. I say we go now."

Rickson kicked the side of the snowcat. "In three hours it's going to be cold enough out here to turn fuel into jello with this puppy's engine not running. Yas's right, we hike out at first light."

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Emerson had gotten turned around somehow. It was easy to do when you had no landmarks to follow through a starless, moonless darkness. He couldn't see or hear the others and he'd run out of daylight. The temperature was plummeting. In the distance, a man screamed.

"Sims! Rickson!!" He pulled himself through the snow, commanding his numb hurting legs to keep moving. Someone was lying at the base of a tree. As he got closer, he could see blood.

Emerson could barely tell that the body was Sims. He looked like a grape left out in the sun for days. His skin stretched tight over his skeletal frame. Frozen blood trailed down the trunk of the tree. Sims' neck was heavily bruised. Behind Yas, something was moving quickly.

"Collins, don't freak out. I found Sims. He's dead."

"Oh... ok.... cold...."

Her eyes were pale and dilated. She seemed completely disoriented. "Collins?"

She locked onto his arms with incredible force. "GGGGGAAAAAAAAAAAAA!!!"

Her razor teeth tore into his shoulder as he screamed. She chewed on it like a crazed animal, so intent on feeding that she had missed the main artery in his neck. Emerson managed to pull his hunting knife out of his left sleeve and rammed the tip of it up under her chin. Blood exploded everywhere as the thing that had been Jennifer struggled to stand up and pull the knife out. When she finally collapsed into the snow there was a decent distance between them.

Emerson could see Rickson running toward him, trying to yell something. The pack rushed out of the darkness and took him down in one swift motion. He screamed and screamed as he was eaten. There were dozens. Regular pale people. Men in old dry rotted Soviet Uniforms. Naked things that didn't even look human anymore. A few ran off to the side of the pack, hauling long strands of Rickson's intestines with them. He was still screaming.

The largest one pointed toward Emerson and screamed. It had no eyes.

"No... no... no... no... NOOOO!! NOOOO!!" Yas ignored the fire in his legs and shoulder as he launched himself toward camp. They moved impossibly fast. A giant clawed hand neatly latched onto the top of his head, and ripped it off. Gore exploded out of him like a shook up warm beer. Then they were all on him.

In the world of living men, they believed the only constant around the mountain was the endless snow and winds. But there were other things.

Old things.

Now they were awake. Now they were hungry for what they knew lay beyond.

## AS IF SAYING GOODBYE

*E.S. Wynn*

*So much can be captured in a photograph even a distant memory....,*

That house.

The shutter snaps, captures the rotting ruin exactly as it stands. Cinder block walls jut against a blue-gray sky, pale and cold, as dead as the matted grass half-standing where the lawn used to be. The concrete pad is cracked. The gravel driveway is scattered, broken by clumps of dry mud and dead weeds. The windows are gone, the tin roof stripped to the broken, burnt wood. One wall wears the red lines of someone's spray-painted tag. *Sur~6.*

In my mind, I hold another image of the house. In my mind, there are curtains and the windows shine with the rippling of old glass as I pass. In my mind, there is a door, solid and sturdy, paint peeling from the bottom rail where a dog once scratched and licked and chewed and whined to be let in. The yard is green, grass kept short and there are roses, ancient and thick-trunked, their blossoms heavy and brilliant, a forest of colorful masks peering beyond the far side of the garage.

I cross into the darkness, raise the camera, snap another frame from reality. The walls are bare now, pitted as if hit by hammers or bullets. The counters, the cabinets, the sink— all gone. Nothing but the bent edge of a pipe jutting through the wall, nothing but rusty outlines on peeling white paint to attest to their existence. The floor gapes with an uneven pattern of concrete dust and lines of grout. The tiles, thin and warped, tiles like squares of red jasper, the tiles I remember— not a trace remains. I stop and stare, close my eyes for a moment, try not to think about the men who must have prised those tiles from the floor, so diligent, stripping every single one, leaving nothing.

Memories chase me like dust as I cross through the living room, stop only to capture a picture of the hearth that once held an iron stove, the hollow socket where only ash and melted plastics lay. The couch, the chairs,

the stereo, the entertainment center built from tall speakers, a stout board, an old-style amplifier, twin VCRs... not even a line of dust lingers to mark what I remember.

*Snap.* A picture of the hallway. The bathroom on the left, all broken pipes, a rotting mattress in the tub, shattered toilet long since gone dry. My father's room is on the right, the floor bare, concrete, the bed gone, the hinges of the missing closet doors hanging free, rusting in the breeze that whispers through the jagged teeth of broken windows. I turn, look over; look up. Someone has drawn a skull in black ink roughly where my father's clock radio once sat.

The shutter echoes as I cross into my room, into the concrete box that once contained everything I cared about, once held an empire of plastic minions, the blocks and bricks I built cities of my own design with. Ridges in the bare concrete floor are all that remain of the tiles I knew so well, the tiles that always felt so cool against my hot cheek, the tiles that made slippery raceways for toy cars, caught the shine of early summer light on countless mornings so long ago. So many things are missing from the room, so many things lost in the landslide of time. Only the bent post where an overhead lamp once scattered soft light through a shade of opaque glass attests to the veracity of my memories.

*Snap.* I cross through the house one last time. I cross through, taking more pictures as I go, capturing the bones of the things that I remember. The bare wall where pink tiles once ran slick with the dewdrops of hot showers. The tiny holes in concrete where my father once ran the wires of a security system. The little wooden doors beside the fireplace where we once built a nest of blankets so our cat could nurse a litter of kittens. The gaping holes in the brick where the fuse box once sat, as choked with webs as it had been with knots of stripped wire. The stump where a gnarled old oak once rose over the backyard like a silent centurion. *Snap, snap, snap.* So many memories. So many things lost.

And yet, some things still remain.

Other memories, memories of intangible things— those are the things that have driven me back to this old house. Shadows, shapes in the shadows, voices, the movement of forms that become dust, scatter under the harsh eye of light. Even in the day, something about the house unnerves me. It's not alive, not in the way that it once seemed to be, but even the bones

still harbor the traces of a soul, of the spirits I remember seeing when I was a child.

In my darkroom at home, I find traces of these creatures, these phantoms, these ghosts on every frame stolen from that dead house. Faces cast in hazes of white vapor, so insubstantial that others might miss them—but I see them. I recognize them.

And as I lift the final picture from the bath of hypo clear, hold it up with fingers on each corner, I see them, so many of them, all crowded around the house as if waiting, as if watching.

As if saying goodbye.



## LETTER TO CINDERELLA

*Shawna Rand*

*The return of the fairy tale and the return of Cinderella herself...*

Dear Cinderella,

You followed my ghost and weren't scared because you are in tune with your ever-growing powers. I led you to this letter tonight because the time has come for you to know the truth, and for me to complete my final task.

It did not take your father long to marry his mistress. Those devils. They deserved each other. By the time I figured out he'd been poisoning me; it was too late. And I died with you by my side. We did not deserve this, my dear.

This may come as a shock to you, although, it does not surprise me; those nasty girls are your half-sisters. Your father had an affair with your wicked stepmother while he was feeding me the poison. The two were partners in dark magic, you see, and their daughters are spawns of evil. God knows there may be other half-siblings roaming about.

Oh, your father, he used to boast about the changes that came about when he was turned from ugly to a dashing, young, handsome man. I only found out after he wooed me. I fell in love with him, married him and soon became pregnant with you. After all that, he told me the truth and I learned that your father was a horrible beast. He only pretended to fall in love with me because it was an arranged marriage between him and my father—and part of a darker spell.

Your grandfather (my father) did not like that I was uninterested in getting married. He knew I was different and it scared him—he knew I was of the light side—good, not evil. My own mother—your grandmother—died in childbirth with me and my father, yes, your grandfather turned cold after that. I think, somehow, he blamed me, although I am not sure if darker elements were not at play.

My father did not like my independence and he did not like my sixth sense. He thought I was going mad, especially when I spoke of the Blue Witch, your Godmother, and my best friend. She came to me after my mother died and always helped me through. The Blue Witch would visit me in my dreams and at night, she used to comfort me and guide me. When my father learned of her magic, he made her find the richest man around. The richest man was ugly. Ugly on both the outside and the inside; he was hideous. In exchange for good looks, he had to marry me and take care of me. There was some sort of love spell involved as he courted me and I fell for him. He took care of me all right. With my father's wicked conjuring of black spells, the Blue Witch was cast out by my father's dark wizardry. I think my father had gone mad, you see, and was ill with wickedness and that is why we need to change all of this. I had to suffer too, as you are now, but we need to end all of this forever.

The only good that came out of being married to your father is you. You are the one who can, and who will, change the course of evil. You are strong and your magic is intensifying. It is time.

I know you suffer now as their slave and their teasing. I also suffered. Before I was pregnant, my husband used to tell me I was the most beautiful woman he'd ever laid eyes on. While he was not with me, he had many lovers, including your evil stepmother. I wonder if she knew about his other lady friends, although she was just as terrible.

After you were born, oh, how I fantasized about running away. But where would I have gone with my lovely daughter and no money? My father sold me off to my husband and I never heard from him again. I had nowhere else to go. I heard later he died alone, repented his wicked ways, and wished forgiveness from me. But he could not get to me, because of his own spell.

I planned our escape in my mind over and over when I realized that getting us out of there was the only thing that mattered and I'd do anything to leave, but it was too late. I was too weak with poison to run. My husband murdered me with a philter which he put into my morning tea and it was also too late when I realized it. He forced me to leave you.

I was never completely gone. I was and am always with you. And you will see, I wasn't too late. It was meant to be this way.

Cinderella, you are kind and generous, even with all you've been through and all you are going through now. I try not to be so angry, but it is

hard. Your father did not take care of you when I died. He was not worthy of being your father. You have the magic, Cinderella. Your pure power is at work, because your Godmother, the lovely Blue Witch, is already back at work. The good magic is taking over and the spell is breaking down.

Your father died not long ago. His handsome looks vanished and his ugly true inner self was revealed. In that broken spell, he got the worst “lover’s” disease possible. He was so embarrassed that he went away and died in his suffering. That unsettled member between his legs became useless forever. His good looks rotted away when the spell began to disintegrate. I can’t help it, but he got what he deserved. I know it is wrong to say so; I must be more forgiving and move toward the good. I do not understand evil or why evil even needs to exist. All I know is that I deserved to find true love and that was taken away from me. It will not be taken from you.

I am so sorry for your misery at the hands of your wicked stepmother. She too, falls into the dark realm.

All of this is coming to an end.

Now you understand more about why the Blue Witch had to go away for a while. But now she’s back. It is all in the timing. You had to go through these terrible ordeals to make you stronger. You will learn more about your own powers over time. When you finally connect with the one who claims to love you, a man known around the land as Prince Charming, you will magically mesmerize him forever.

And it is right. For the prince is no better than you, nor you him; together, you complete each other and good shall follow. Love is the most powerful magic of all.

You will marry and live happy forever. And that will be the start of much more happiness to follow throughout the land. Only love is real.

My visits to you must remain secret for now. If anyone found out before the spell is broken, they would lock you away. Trust no one but yourself until the spell connects you and the prince.

When I was sick with the poison, I found a way to get out of bed at night while my husband was with his lovers. I was not strong enough to run away with you, but I was able to do other things. You will see, I did not die without setting you up for this moment, Cinderella. Along with the money I managed to hide away are the dress, precious jewels and glass shoes. The Blue Witch told me to gather these things and they are buried in a trunk

below the roses in the yard. I planted these roses when I was pregnant with you, long ago. You will see, my dear, timing had to be precise.

This is the end of your torment. Your father's wife and those two girls have harmed you and others. Only you can break the evil spell to stop them and all the darkness that has followed.

In the bottom of the trunk, below the treasures, you will find my book of spells. You must work together with your Godmother, the Blue Witch. She will appear just after midnight by my grave and help you raise me from the dead so I can finish my work. Before then, you have work to do.

As you know, all the ladies in the land are invited to the ball at the Kingdom. Your half-sisters will try to keep you away, but you will get there. Stay close to your Godmother before the ball. She will appear here in the garden and help you. You will dance with Prince Charming until midnight. He will want to sweep you away right then, but please, remember to return at midnight.

When you leave the castle, leave one of the glass slippers behind so the spell can begin its magic. The shoe will make its way back to you and free you forever. This might seem out of this world now, but together you will have a daughter one day. You will pass the glass slippers on to her as a memory of what you went through and of the love you were meant to have, in order to pass it to her.

You need to be home by midnight, so the spell will continue to work. Do not forget. This is your destiny. The prince will be kind and good to you, as will his father, the king. You will be well taken care of. They are great sorcerers and they will know you are the one. All together, your white magic shall reign.

Until then, you must spend one more day living with your stepmother and half-sisters until the slipper makes its way to you, my dear. The prince will not quit until he finds you. Even if they try to hide you, or lock you away, do not give up. Half-sisters are already ugly with hatred and will go crazy trying to make those shoes fit. No matter what, the shoes will be too small for them. They will never get the glass slipper to fit. You see, it will only fit you as it conforms to the magic within you.

The prince will find you—I don't know how, but, when he does, the glass slipper will fit, and the white magic will take over. Then I can make my final move. Your awful stepmother and sisters will finally learn what it

means to suffer—as it is the only way to make the spell go away. I am not sure what will come in the tempest of the broken dark spell.

After I finish my work, I can rest. You will see me in your dreams and I will always watch over you. You and your Godmother will finally get to know each other, she will appear to you often and she will remain close. And I too, will be near, but need to cross over to the other realm. No one will ever harm you ever again. It won't be allowed.

For tonight, we shall raise our power. It is the only way. It will all end after the stroke of midnight. You will live happily ever after with a kind man who truly loves you. The spell will be broken forever, and I shall be free when you reign. Those who betrayed us must pay.

# CANCER

*Mathias Jansson*

*Coming back to take revenge  
for that which could have been avoided...*

I will open the gates of hell  
Let the flood of hate drown you  
Don't be fooled by my calmness  
The mountain is strong  
To hold the massive pressure inside  
But when the wall cracks at last  
The flood of Armageddon will rise  
Demons escape from their captivity  
Starving with blood lust and revenge  
  
I feel the sickness growing inside me  
Spreading and mutating in my body  
Perverting my soul with pain  
I will never forget the one  
Who sentenced me to death  
By misjudgment and incompetence  
With hell's fire I will come back

Breathe my hate into his lungs

Tear all that he loves apart

Drown him slowly in his own tears of despair

Beware, you bastard of Hippocrates

I am the revenger behind the gates of hell

Ready to turn the skeleton key

And bring you my gift of endless fear.

## MIDNIGHT SHARP

*Logan Noble*

*Clock watching sometimes leads us into situations we should have avoided...*

Glenn waited in the darkness beneath the overpass. The night wore on as it always did in this godforsaken city. The days burned hot, sun high, the asphalt hot enough to cremate a corpse. But as the sun set and the moon rose, the world seemed to cool, air filling with moisture, thick enough to choke you. On top of that, the atmosphere was full of smog, black and putrid. It weighed on you, pulling you down. There was something about tonight, a sense of déjà vu, a sense of impending doom. Glenn felt something terrible was coming his way. Perhaps it was the inky darkness around him. Maybe it was something else entirely.

Glenn thought it was nerves. This waiting was slowly killing him. The suspense. The business he'd started with the Russians downtown had been scary stuff. *Scary stuff that was going to make him very rich*, he thought, and the idea of having all the money they had promised, excited him. He'd quit his job at GENTECH, a weapon production company, at their request. *"All we need is some information. Before you leave the place, pop in this disc, and drag the files onto it. We'll contact you when the time is right."*

The job had been detailed by Dima Roman, an old man dressed in a suit that was worth more than Glenn's car. Dima had sported rings with diamonds as large as quarters, each one tight on his sausage fingers. He assumed Dima was some kind of leader in the organization and that couple of hours spent in their building, an area set up in the back of a tavern, had been terrifying. Men with guns, posted on doors. A crowd of them playing cards had glared at him when he'd entered. Their headquarters, (if you could call it that) looked like it used to be a kitchen.

They'd targeted him at the job when he began making bets at the very tavern the meeting that had taken place. Glenn was a sucker for sports bets;



though his job paid well and he was decent at tracking sports stats and statistics, it always felt small. Nickel and dime. Insignificant. He wanted to be rich. Working at a small time weapons manufacture was not the life he had envisioned. Glenn spent every day signing invoices, matching numbers on cargo. The Russians had provided a way out. \$200,000. For a disc of information. It was too good to pass up.

After the deal had been made and he had shaken Dima's sweaty hand, he had begun to fret. Glenn had lain awake all night, thinking about Dima's greasy smile and massive rings. These men felt dangerous. He needed some insurance. After a lot of thinking and a hundred dollars, he bought a pistol. Glenn had never fired one. Or held one, for that matter. But the weight of it inside his jacket had made him feel safe. He reached for it, tracing the outline with his hand. It was moments away from midnight. Glenn waited.

With a shiver, Glenn cursed the weather. Why is it so cold!? The money would be worth it. He had the disc and \$200 thousand awaited him. He would-

Suddenly the air began to stir. It felt like a storm had descended; an electric charge surrounded him, pregnant and powerful. Glenn looked up, expecting clouds, but the night sky was clear. *What's going on here?* He looked around the deep shadows of the overpass, seeing nothing but mud, cement and broken beer bottles. A faint hum filled the air. Then, instantly, a man stood before him.

Glenn screamed and stumbled backward, reaching for the gun, fumbling to pull it from the pocket. The man had appeared from nowhere. He stepped forward just as Glenn pulled the gun, brandishing it, ready to pull the trigger. "You may not want to do that." Glenn stared ahead, speechless. The moonlight had cast itself onto the man's face. Glenn was looking at himself.

Same dark eyes, curly black hair, thin lips. It's a face he knew intimately, after all, he'd spent his whole life looking in a mirror at it. He was even dressed the same, long overcoat and rumpled jeans. Glenn blinked, once, twice, a third time. "Who... who....?" He was stammering and the figure (himself?) glared.

"No time for this crap. I came through first, but the Russians are seconds behind. No time for long explanations. Give me the gun." Other Glenn held out his hand, impatient. Without warning, the air seemed to thicken again, and suddenly, behind Other Glenn, three figures popped into

existence. His doppelganger grabbed Glenn and shoved him forward, just as the three newcomers began to scream in Russian. “Run, you idiot!” Other Glenn shoved him again and they were sprinting, just as gunshots sounded. Bullets whizzed by them, angry hornets. Glenn screamed.

“What the hell’s happening!?” The Russians gave chase, shouting in short, foreign bursts of anger. Other Glenn cut ahead, leading them into a narrow alley.

Other Glenn spoke in short bursts, panting. “The CD you’re about to hand over. Holds the only remaining data. For a machine!” A gunshot sounded again and Other Glenn howled in pain. Glenn caught him as he stumbled and saw blood pouring from his pant leg.

“You’re shot!” Glenn gasped and his other-self pushed by him again, hard.

“Keep moving!” They did, but his other-self had slowed considerably. “Destroy the data. The machine the Russians have is a time machine. The data is the only other record that it exists. Without it, they can use it to commit any crime they want. Untraceable.” They rounded a corner and Glenn recognized the area. The tavern, the one the Russians owned, stood before them, dark and empty. The Other Glenn had led them here.

“A time machine!?” Glenn shook his head. “That’s not possible!” *This doesn’t make sense.*

The Other Glenn sucked in a deep breath of air. “It is. That’s how I traveled backward. I handed over the CD; they told me what it’s for, what they plan on doing. With the CD in hand, they didn’t need me. Out came the guns. I used the machine and it took me to that spot. The overpass. Why, I’m not sure. I had to warn you.” The Russians were shouting, close now, just out of sight. “I’ll take the gun and hold them back. Go inside, warn yourself. Set the machine for midnight sharp.” The Other Glenn grabbed him, his eyes wide. “GO!”

Bullets pounded the wall behind them, the gunshots were deafening. Glenn, with one final look to his future self, bleeding, headed toward the door, ready to travel back in time. As he went inside, Other Glenn screamed, firing the pistol, the noise drowning him out.

The tavern was empty. And dark. Glenn moved quickly, shoving past several empty tables, eyes set for the back. *The machine must be back here.* He’d seen the backroom during his meeting with Dina and he thought he had seen a door in the back, a room tucked away. Perhaps a room with a

time machine? *What if I don't know how this thing works? They could gun me down before I even entered any data.*

Glenn pushed the back door open, entering into the poker room where he had met Dima. It was empty as well. If he had entered in and had come face to face with a crowd of scowling, armed Russians, this mission would be over. In the back, by a tall freezer, was a heavy looking wooden door. It looked like the only other exit in the room. *I hope it's not a walk in freezer or something.* Glenn made a beeline for it, shoving a flimsy poker table out of the way. With a shove, he pushed into another room.

The room was frigid. It seemed to drop in temperature at least twenty degrees. It was lightly lit and, after Glenn's eyes adjusted, he saw the machine. It stood by itself in the room, enormous, made of long silver beams that twisted around in strange patterns. It had a chair directly in the center and the beams surrounded it in various crisscrossed patterns. *It's real*, Glenn thought. He had considered the fact he might be insane. He ran forward and leapt into the chair, looking at the display before him. It was a small screen, the glass clean, with several buttons juttied out from the bottom. He tapped the glass and the screen blinked to life, the light blinding. On it, in bright green letters, it read:

Travel Date:

12 August 2014

Time:

At the bottom of the screen was an empty box, the cursor blinking, ready for the time input. Glenn took a breath. Midnight. Sharp. *Here I go. Traveling through time. To save myself.* Glenn laughed. It sounded insane to his ears, the laugh of a man on the edge of his sanity. Outside the room he could hear the Russians yelling. *Future me is most likely dead.* The thought was sobering. Using the keys, Glenn entered the time. On the computer screen, the word 'GO' appeared. Glenn tapped it. A sense of vertigo hit him and the door, beginning to blur and stretch, slammed open in front of him. The Russians stood, all three of them, yelling, their words lost as an enormous pressure grabbed his brain, squeezing. The men seemed to stretch as Glenn's vision blurred. Then, his world turned white.

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In the darkness beneath the overpass, Glenn waited. The night wore on as it always did in this godforsaken city. The days burned hot, sun high, the asphalt hot enough to cremate a corpse. But as the sun set and the moon rose, the world seemed to cool, air filling with moisture, thick enough to choke you. On top of that, the atmosphere was full of smog, black and putrid. It weighed on you, pulling you down. There was something about tonight, a sense of déjà vu, a sense of impending doom. Glenn felt something terrible was coming his way. Perhaps it was the inky darkness around him. Maybe it was something else entirely.

REPEAT PERFORMANCE

Dorothy Davies

*They say ghosts are no more than a fragment of life caught in a time loop,
but here there is a reason for them constantly coming back...*

Florabella hesitated in the church doorway, just as she had done a hundred times before. Count them, she thought, one hundred times. This is the one hundredth and first time and still there is no end to the coming here and the going through this and the going home again. I tire of it. I want it to end. It feels as if it will not end. It cannot end until penance is done. How many times, I wonder, does that entail?

She turned and smiled at her father for the one hundredth and first time and they began the slow walk down the aisle. Sunlight through the stained glass windows cast colours before her, petals to walk on, petals that would not catch her satin shoes and cause her to slip.

The church was full of flowers, in huge vases on pedestals, gathered into small bunches on the pew ends, trailed across the altar. Every year they were there, just as the wedding party was there. They too had become trapped in the never-ending cycle. Not a flower was different from the other one hundred times she had looked at them.

Florabella knew she was beautiful, knew the golden hair cascading down her back would catch the sunlight, just as the silks and satin of her wedding dress would reflect the sun in all its glory. She knew she was perfect, too perfect.

“You look lovely, darling.” Her father’s words, repeated every time at that moment, caused a pain to pierce her side and into her heart. She only looked good on that day at that time. She knew, as he did, that the other 364 days they laid mouldering under the great slabs in the Loverett chapel just over there, where the cameraman was hiding. At least he believed he was. Every year without fail for at least the last ten years he had tried to capture the wedding, every year he had gone home with a blank film. She gave him full marks for trying.

The guests turned as one at her entrance: Benjamin got to his feet and turned to look at her with open-mouthed astonishment whilst his best man, Jeffrey, was as languid and indifferent to her as always. But then he preferred men, she knew that. Jeffrey was the cause of their problem, their endless repeating of the wedding. Jeffrey, the one who dabbled in the darkness, who had called up demons and helped cast them, the entire wedding party, into this hell.

The vicar, an innocent trapped in their nightmare, stood waiting at the altar. He showed signs of strain, just as he always did. For him, as for all of them, the nightmare was the repetition. They were forced into an exact re-enactment with no chance of breaking the spell. Yet. She knew if she could find a way to make one tiny thing different, they would go to the spirit realms and carry on a life there. No waking on the 14th July and becoming their living selves again.

She caught a glimpse of utter repulsion in Jeffrey's eyes but saw the usual adoration in Benjamin's. He never seemed to grow tired of seeing his beloved walk toward him, of joining with her in marriage, of going in the landau back to the Loverett mansion and there –

There was the chance she had of changing the scenario. Not here, where the wedding went with military precision: hymns, prayers, exchanging of vows, exchanging of rings, the heavy scent of the flowers in her nostrils, the sight of her handsome husband in her eyes, the longing for the night in her loins, a night that never happened. She went to the altar - and her grave - a virgin.

Keep your film rolling, cameraman, she thought. It had taken her some time to find out who the person was and what he was trying to do – capture the yearly event on film to prove that ghosts existed. The idea amused her, as did making sure he never caught their images on the mechanical device. It was easy; they were wrapped around in invisibility to all but those with the gift of 'seeing' but film, no. He tried, tried hard but he would never succeed. And if I have my way, we won't be back next year, she thought with savage intent. Then what will he do for so-called 'ghost hunting?'

I need to walk away from the vestry after signing my name for the 101st time and say: *look, silly man, you're on a loser here. We're spirits trapped in a situation we can't escape. We're not ghosts. In any event, they don't exist. What you think are ghosts are no more than people's lingering*

images caught in a time loop. Got it? We, on the other hand, are working out a penance for meddling or dabbling or messing with, choose your own descriptive word, with the dark side. That's all.

But I can't do it, any more than I can change anything that happens when I go through this ceremony every year.

With Benjamin at my side, I walk back along the aisle, stepping on the colourful sunshine, smiling at each other, whilst I sense the glowering, menacing presence of Jeffrey right behind us. Each time we do this, each time we re-enact this ceremony, the menace grows stronger. I have to find a way to break this cycle!

Out into the sunshine and the gathered well-wishers throwing rice at us, rice which catches in my hair and my bouquet. I shake it out; the birds need it more than I do.

The landau, also decorated with flowers, awaits us. Benjamin helps me to climb in and then sits down beside me, smiling with contentment and love. It is the best moment of all in this endlessly recycled day. From here on it just goes downhill fast.

"Florabella, I love you." Benjamin takes my hand, the one with its glittering new wedding ring, and kisses it. "I wish this moment could last forever."

"Hush," I tell him, as I do every time. "Be careful what you wish for, you just might get it."

He smiles. Poor darling doesn't understand the powerful thing thoughts and wishes are. Even after all this time.

Loverett Manor is a blaze of flowers and colour, a sumptuous feast awaits us, guests who did not come to the ceremony are standing around, glasses of punch in their hands and, for some, already in their bodies, judging by their red faces and extra loud conversations. We are greeted with congratulations, kisses and handshakes. It is a moment to treasure, especially when you know what is to come.

I sometimes ask myself at this point of the endlessly repeated day, how everyone could be so happy, smiling; confident and forward looking, when they know what is to come. But a thought occurs to me, for the first time, I have to admit. Do they know what is to come? Do we all know what we are doing, or am I the only person who knows that we are reliving this day as a penance for what is to come? I believe I am.

That is the first change, then. My thinking is different.

It is part way through the afternoon reception when it begins to go wrong. It is when Jeffrey has consumed enough punch or spirits of some kind to approach me as I loiter at the large open window looking out across the lawns at the trimmed hedges and flower beds. He stands by me, breathing alcoholic fumes into my neck. I am aware that despite his tendencies, he has some feeling for me, which has now been taken from him because of my marriage to his best friend.

“You stole Benjamin from me,” he begins, as always.

“Benjamin was not yours to begin with.”

“Ah, sweet Florabella, that’s where you are wrong. Benjamin has always been mine. That which he will seek to put into you he has already put into me.”

He seeks to shock me, as if I don’t know what homosexual people do with one another to get satisfaction. Little does he know what I have overheard in my time. I am no innocent when it comes to sexual knowledge, only sexual experience.

“I will have him back!” he hisses, so low only I hear it. And that is when I know I have to act. I turn and throw a curse at him, one I have learned in the dark hours of training as a witch. He falls back, shocked, white-faced and unsteady. He leans on a chair and the white slowly changes to a deep dark shocking red.

“Ah, the bride knows more than she lets on.”

The hand gestures are something I don’t know but the darkness he conjures is real. Guests begin to comment, to cry out, to utter oaths and make for the outside, but too late. The darkness smothers and covers and suddenly the very walls begin to bow outwards, the ceilings to sag towards us and the house – implodes.

No one escapes.

No one.

In the long lonely empty hours I spend in my coffin in my stone sarcophagus, I wonder how I did not realise Jeffrey had been meddling with the dark powers. I was so busy with my own white witch work to ensure I got the man I loved that I overlooked his work to ensure he kept the man he loved.

In the end we all lost, didn’t we?

The Loverett chapel was full with so many of us needing to be buried that we were piled on top of one another in sturdy coffins meant to last a

lifetime. I am above Benjamin, alongside my parents and a few relatives. I don't like it but at least I get out once a year to re-enact my wedding day, the proudest day of my life.

The cameraman would love to capture the occasion but what is important is the reason why we re-enact this wedding every year. If you meddle with any forces, white or black, there are repercussions. I used my powers wrongly, to try and injure someone. He used his powers wrongly and caused the death of a great many people. Between us, Jeffrey and I committed most of the cardinal sins – and we were condemned to pay the price. Until one or other of us breaks the pattern in some tiny, almost insignificant way, we will be doomed to relive this day forever. He has no intention of changing it. This I know, for he follows the pattern exactly where I hope to put a foot wrong and break it. I see his look, I know what it means. *You helped me create this; you are as doomed to do this as I am.* This I accept, only up to a point.

I hoped that my change of thinking would change the day this time. It wasn't enough.

I am back in my coffin, back in my dry as dust bones, my wedding dress stored for another twelve months. When the 14th July rolls around for the 102nd time, I will try again.

I wonder if the cameraman will be there next time...

TABLE BUTTE

Dave Fragments

*Again the word is, beware what you seek on mountain tops –
And what might return to haunt you*

My desert holds many spirits: ghosts, dream-weavers, dust devils, but since the alien invasion, mutants. To the ghosts that lingered in the shimmering waves of heat by day and the vaporous mists by night, the mutants were abominations, the damned cast out on Hell's doorstep, a desecration to the ancestors, and a world-death of oblivion and chaos.

"There's vultures circlin' Table Butte," Old Man Ebenezer said, standing in our cabin, smacking Tyrell and me awake with his walking stick.

"We're sleeping, old man," Tyrell growled. He pulled his jeans over his hips while still in bed. Ebenezer opened the shutters. Sunlight flooded the cabin.

"You sure?" I muttered, wiping sleep from my face. Ebenezer poked at my bare ass with his walking stick.

"You can't sleep, stupid. I had a vision last night, aliens torturin' up on the Butte. You're the only one can go an' check it out," Ebenezer yelled. I found the dregs of yesterday's coffee in a cup on our nightstand. It was bitter but it was caffeine. I drank, sat up, scratched my balls and looked out the window. Vultures circled the top of Table Butte. The sun was already on the Butte. I might be an itinerate psychic from Las Vegas but I weren't stupid.

"If the vultures are circling, he's dead by now. Nothing but a ghost. Probably another jerkoff druggie went into the city for drugs and found some mutants." Ebenezer whacked at my bare butt.

"I hate seeing naked bony ass. Put some clothes on, will ya? Ain'tcha cold at night, sleeping like that? Reminds me of them thar naughty houses near Las Vegas and the whores that used them."

“Have you been smoking the bad weed again, old man?” Tyrell asked sarcastically as he rinsed the coffee pot and refilled it. Ebenezer swung his stick. Tyrell grabbed it. Their eyes met in anger.

“Behave, you two.” I pulled on my jeans, a Henley, and what passed for boots.

This sounded like another of Ebenezer’s “salvage” jobs. Once a month to six weeks he gets a vision and takes the vapors. Go salvage some half-dead city-fool and bring him to our settlement, he would order.

“You want me to go up there? I can’t sense thoughts up there. What are you sensing? Aliens? Mutants?”

“It’s like a ghost. I seen it in a dream. Get moving.”

Years ago, Ebenezer appeared in the middle of my mentalist act. Scared the crap out of me. He was an unreadable blackness surrounded by ghosts. That night, he taught me to talk to the dead and read minds rather than read the body movements of our marks. I tried distance readings and projecting my thoughts around the world but wasn’t successful. He said I was too young. The ability would come with age. I think Ebenezer could read the alien minds and see the invasion. I think his psychic ability was that strong. I think “old” didn’t cover his age.

Ten years ago when the aliens arrived, they overran the cities first, turning those enslaved into mutants and sending them into the countryside to raid for food. These days, the mutants ringed the desert with warnings. They blasted roads where we walk, melted the asphalt to tar and hung body parts to rot in the heat. Grim warnings of the future planned for mankind. I wasn’t going anywhere without some assurance it wasn’t a trap.

“Do your trance thing right here, right now.”

Ebenezer turned to me and entered his trance. He gasped. His body whirled around, shoulders shook, his breath came in gasps, eyes went wild, tongue lolled. His body punctuated the air with farts and belches and his head and shoulders made the movements of a man ready to launch his last meal. Tyrell grabbed the back of his head and aimed him at the sink. I wagged a finger and laughed. So did Ebenezer. Tyrell swore under his breath. He didn’t think it was funny.

“You bastards,” Tyrell said.

Ebenezer straightened up and let me into his mind. He closed his eyes and a vision of the Butte appeared in his thoughts. There were clouds, smoke, pain, chaos, something very old; something in chains, eternal

punishment, never-ending torment. Whatever was up there, whatever ghost was bound to the rock, had power and wouldn't let go.

This was how the aliens started a possession and eventually mutation; invoking simple thoughts, planting the malign seeds of mental cancers, then never letting go. Tyrell slapped me to break the trance. The vision swirled and Ebenezer stood, beating his head with his fists, gasping for breath and shaking.

"Are you two crazy?" Tyrell yelled.

"It's not human."

"It ain't no Mutant. It's of Earth, sort of human," Ebenezer said.

"What does 'sort of human' mean? A mutant we've never seen?" Tyrell asked. Ebenezer slipped into a chair, wasted, haggard.

"He's totemic..." Ebenezer yelled and then his voice changed. His hidden self took over. "He is fire turned to sea turned to earth turned to air turned to life. He's the will and word of creation, both dead and alive in the heat and rock. He waits to become the flame that consumes at the end of time. a circle, the beginning and end, the great cleansing renewal. There were more of them but the others punished this one and bound the one to the Butte. Left it to suffer. Chthonic. Deified. Fetishized. Worshipped. By faith created and abandoned."

"That's the biggest pile of psychic horse-shit I ever heard," Tyler said.

"Un-believers are doomed to die." Ebenezer's hands trembled. He wrung them together to stop the tremors. "These don't pass like we do. In the end we become star dust, atoms wandering the universe."

We were on dangerous ground here. I needed to know more. If the entity on the mountain could reach out like that then merely going to the summit was dangerous. When my Mother passed the gift to me, she said never seek fear in a handful of dust, never look into the mind of an immortal and never seek Death incarnate. There was only one question I dared ask.

"Tell me there's not a demon up on Table Butte. Tell me I won't die today."

Ebenezer shrugged. I put my hand on his forehead to read deeper thoughts.

"Come hither, Slayer Time, Ancient of Days, and consume me," was as loud as if he spoke the words. I was too late. I made him sleep. Tyrell

looked at me puzzled, confused.

“When he wakes, be gentle,” I said.

“If? You’re going up there?” Tyrell asked as I strapped my gun belt to my hips and checked the pistol and magazine.

“This desert, my desert, is my home. I was born in this desert. It’s part of me. I know the names of its rocks and its secret pathways. I know the wells of power and the gateways to wisdom. My shadow is under these red rocks. Whatever it is on Table Butte, the land will not permit it to harm me.”

“Can’t you initiate that visualize thing you two just did?”

“I’m not that powerful. Ebenezer spent years in contact with ghosts and spirits.” He knew I was lying. Years ago I let Tyrell see into my mind to experience the world of spirits and ghosts. What he saw made him beg me never do it a second time.

I loaded myself on the mule and began the climb to the summit. It was five hundred feet above the desert and the path wound around the cliff-like walls of the butte. Death was a slip and fall. Hard rock would shatter a skull, break a leg. After that, wait helpless and die. The flesh rots to sun-bleached bones and dust. Dust. What once thou once were is what thou will become.

At noon I saw a man on top of Table Butte.

They'd tied him to the ground, naked and spread-eagled. His arms and legs ended in burnt stumps. His guts were drawn and scattered. Bones showed white through ripped skin. His face was a mass of torn flesh and, in one final mutilation, his genitals lay on his chest. A flock of vultures feasted on these delicacies of stinking carrion. I chased the vultures with a few rocks. They shrieked and vomited, blackening the rocks with their gorge of dried blood and half-digested flesh.

I sensed his mind in the grip of a blackness worse than death. Sensing me, his head moved, his body jerked. He twisted, bare bones ripping dead flesh. His jaw moved and spit out half a tongue covered in vulture vomit. I lost it. I don’t know how long it took me to stop retching. A deep and resonant voice, slurred by a half formed tongue compelled my attention.

“Water,” he gasped without a tongue. I turned away, composed myself and placed a survival blanket over the body. I cut the ropes without looking and put a water bottle into what remained of his mouth. He drank with gagging sounds.

“Ebenezer?”

“He sent me.”

“He chose you.”

This was no mere mortal. A whirlwind blew across the top of the butte. Static electricity crackled. I crouched, curled into a ball, hands over my head. The air burned with electric fire and lightning blasted the rocks to dust. When I looked up a figure stood before me, nine feet tall, glories streaming from his face, a blue-white nimbus of electric fire crackled above his head.

“Stand as a man, not a slave,” he said. My mind reached out. Barriers fell. I pushed into his mind, seeking his name.

“What are you?” I asked.

“I melted the icy ocean before I gave man fire and with fire, man created civilization. For that crime, the others bound me to this rock.”

“You can’t possibly exist,” I interjected. Somehow, in the days of alien invasion when governments fell and chaos ruled, he found Ebenezer and convinced the old man to set him free. He was immortal, a god of creation from the time before time counted and damned for giving fire to man.

“I was bound to the earth to suffer the fate of men. As millennia passed, the old gods grew bored when their followers moved on to new faiths. All that remained in the hearts of men were myths and legends of their feats and battles. And so they left this realm. As long as fire burns in the cores of the earth and blood beats in the hearts of men, I abide.”

I felt the Butte tremble, turn jet black, adamantine, crystalline. The world, knowing that I woke a god, shook to its core.

“Mankind was once the plaything of fools. They scattered across the universe. Earth is defenseless no more.” Without warning, the universe -- suns, stars, the vastness of space, all creation the past, the many presents and infinite futures -- revealed its secrets to me.

The aliens and their mutant stooges saw. They were the conquerors and would not be turned from the earth. They rose in a frenzy, seeking slaughter, the death of all men. The shadow of their city-killers moved through the skies, shaking the heavens like death knells of oblivion, blotting out the sun, destroying all life in those shadows. The Earth would be blackened, a throne of might built on the bones of men. A barren world of ash and dust, fallen down.

In ancient times, the gods who wielded the powers, who commanded the elements of earth, sky, fire and water would defend the world and write a new chapter of heroic deeds. I knew what to do but had not the power. I was like a child in supplication to a newly risen god, begging for salvation. The fires of the Earth answered my prayers. Fire consumed my right hand and traveled up my arm. Muscles and powers increased. I became the new champion, a new Atlas to shoulder the earth, a new Prometheus bringer of fire, suitably muscled, every move rippling with power and mind reaching out to all living creatures.

As the glories and powers burned my soul, I bloomed, brighter than the sun, a beacon of hope. This would be a new Age of Man -- unbounded by foolish, absent gods. Man not as servant and mendicant but master of his fate.

I spoke to the world.

"Hear me all who would use this world. Leave this world, green and fertile. Leave this star, hot and vibrant. You will not delight in the death cry of humans and the living creatures that inhabit this orb. You will not celebrate in the ashes of burnt bones and barren rocks. Find a world around a cold star where life has ceased."

They answered by poisoning their thoughts to slaughter and activating their weapons of death.

A great web of magnetics spun from my mind, turned the sands of the desert into lightning bolts, rocks into red-hot missiles, and launched those at the aliens and mutants. The projectiles turned spaceships to blue-white stars. I reached out with my thoughts and burned the aliens and their mutants to ashes. They all fell down.

Prometheus, spawn of Titans, god of fire, maker of man, stood by my side. His wounds healed, his body perfection.

"My old friend left you the greater portion," he said.

"He's met with Death and soon they will meet each other as old friends." I don't know why I said that but it was true. I'd known since we fled the city. I could read Ebenezer's aura and see the dark desires hiding in the corners of his mind. I had convinced myself that I was wrong and that the bargain he made with me to save our tiny community and the world would be his life line.

"Tell him I understand." A hot wind blew across the Butte. The donkey swished its tail at a fly and stomped the rocks, impatient. It didn't

care but for food and water.

“Your ass understands the needs of flesh and blood. One day, you will teach mankind to transcend those needs. Guard this world well until time ends and existence ceases” he said.

“And once again like Atlas, Prometheus takes the world on his shoulders.” I said and we parted. I went down from Table Rock transfigured and ready to rebuild the world.

ROYAL JELLY

Micke Lindquist

***Royalty will be obeyed at all costs, Beware when you return to the
Queen's abode...***

Honey, I'm buzzing
Spring fashion - yellow and black
When the boys start swarming
You know the Queen is back

I'm the bitch with a stinger
Honey, I'm home
My heart's still cold
Like an ice cream cone

I was a bride left at the altar
A Queen on the throne alone
A mother of thousands
And you were just a drone

You drank my royal jelly
And bragged to the hive
You should've known
Queen bees are the stingy kind

You've been a real busy bee
Going from flower to flower
Don't think I've forgotten
How you turned my honey sour

A taste that lingered
From your sins of last summer
Dreams of revenge kept me sweet
Through my winter slumber

I saw you covered in pollen
Spreading love to every slut
I know you drank their nectar
Your back scarred by thorny cuts

Honey, I'm home
Now taste my bitter kiss
I'm the bitch with a stinger

This time I won't miss...

HOMECOMING

Thomas M. Malafarina

Then there are the times you should definitely not come back...

“Home is a place you grow up wanting to leave, and grow old wanting to get back to” – John Ed Pearce

“When you finally go back to your old hometown, you find it wasn't the old home you missed but your childhood” – Sam Ewing

“Nothing but the dead and dying, back in my little town” – Paul Simon and Art Garfunkel

“You can't go home again.” – Thomas Wolfe

Mason always believed someday he would return. There was something about his hometown and the many memories of his happy childhood there, which seemed to beckon to him. Ashton, Pennsylvania was somewhere in his mind and close to his heart throughout his entire life. It was odd how no matter how long he was away or where he happened to live, Ashton was the only place he truly considered home. There were times when he believed he could actually feel it pulling him, almost calling to him in a sad and mournful voice like the heartbroken cries of a jilted lover. “Come home... come home... come home.”

However, life had to be lived and there were things Mason Fredericks wanted to accomplish in his life, which he just couldn't find in his simple little town. As a result, after graduation he had said goodbye to his hometown to attend college in another state and had never returned; not for any reason. He had missed all of his high school class reunions and all of his cousins' weddings. In fact, he didn't even return to attend family funerals, including those of his parents and his older brother.

During quiet moments at night or when he was traveling alone on long business trips, Mason often had pleasant memories of his youth in Ashton. He often thought about the parks, the local stores and of his childhood friends. He had been a paperboy and as such had known just about everyone in town.

At different times in his life, he had considered stopping back to see what had become of his precious Ashton, but he never did. He knew about the adage “You can never go home again” which was a take on an original quote by Thomas Wolfe and he believed he understood what that meant. He knew if he were to go home, all that would await him there would be change and disappointment. He loved his hometown but knew he would have trouble dealing with the changes.

The playgrounds, the schools, the stores, the houses, the people all would be different now. The world is constantly moving forward and as it did, it left the happy memories of young boys like Mason in its wake, replacing them with whatever was to follow. He often imagined the Ashton of his youth as a series of plastic railroad models laid out on a card table. Then while enjoying his fantasy, he imagined life coming along in the form of a rowdy child, who with a beefy arm would simply sweep his memories onto the floor where they would shatter into pieces.

Now, after more than forty years, he had done it. He had finally returned home. Mason stood on the sidewalk, staring in amazement at what he saw. He had prepared himself to see many changes. So many that he assumed he would barely recognize his hometown. But that hadn’t been the case at all. To his shock, the town looked exactly as it had looked when he was a boy. Over there was Leon’s Barber Shop and there was Marco’s Shoe Repair. He turned and saw Woodman’s Restaurant and Gerhard’s Dress Shop. It was incredible! The town looked exactly as he had remembered it from his childhood.... exactly.

Then he realized something was wrong. What he was seeing wasn’t possible. He recalled when he had left for college at age eighteen Woodman’s Restaurant had no longer been in business. The owner Stan Woodman had passed away and his children had no interest in the business. As a result, his widow had chosen to shut the place down. And hadn’t Marco the shoemaker retired, closed down the shoe repair shop and moved to Florida back when Mason was still in high school? Yet here they all seemed to be. None of this made any sense.

“Hey, Perry Mason!” a voice called from the distance. He hadn’t heard the voice or that name in almost fifty years, but he recognized both immediately. It was Jimmy “Duke” Wellington, a well-known local troublemaker who had been two years older than Mason. Duke had always call Mason “Perry Mason” because of the popular TV Show from his childhood.

Then an icy chill crept down the back of Mason’s neck when he realized it couldn’t possibly be Jimmy Wellington because he knew Jimmy died in an automobile accident on his way home from high school graduation over forty years earlier. Mason looked in the direction of the voice and sure enough it was a twelve-year-old version of Duke Wellington and he was approaching a skinny young boy of about ten with a newspaper sack over his shoulder.

Mason felt his breath catch in his throat. He knew that boy. Somehow, impossibly that boy was him; a young version of Mason Fredericks. Mason suddenly felt weak, his legs became wobbly, his hands trembled and a buzzing noise began to rise inside his head. Then everything around him went black.



Mason woke, confused. The last thing he remembered was standing down town. Then something... something happened. In his confusion, Mason had the strange detached feeling he often experienced after waking from a dream. Maybe that was what had happened. Perhaps he had been dreaming about something. He wished he could recall what it had been.

He looked around and discovered he was in the middle of a cemetery. He had no idea how he had gotten there. He recognized it as Brockman’s Cemetery, which he recalled was located near the western end of Ashton; an area locals referred to as the top of town. He remembered that his parents as well as his older brother were buried in this graveyard.

Mason looked down at the tombstones laid out in front of him and discovered he was standing at the exact location of his family’s burial plots. He suddenly felt a pang of guilt for having not attended their funerals. There had been no good reason for his absence, no justifiable excuse. Although at the time, his justifications did seem legitimate enough; at least to him. When his parents passed, he had been working in China as a

representative for his company seeking new business opportunities. When his brother called with the news that his parents had both been killed in an automobile accident, Mason explained that he simply couldn't get back to the states for the funerals. The deal he had been brokering was too big and far too critical for him to leave at this juncture.

Mason's brother had been furious with him but Mason insisted there was nothing he could do about the situation. Then after a heated argument, just before his brother disconnected, he told Mason he never wanted to speak to him again and that he should never bother to return home. Mason knew he was wrong and his older brother had every right to feel the way he did.

Now, standing in this place of the dead, Mason was suddenly filled with sadness at the realization of how he had disrespected his parents and had let down his brother. They were all dead now and it was much too late to do anything about it. The melancholy inside him seemed to grow more intense as it finally sunk in that they were gone for good and he would never see them again.

Of course, he had known this reality for many years, but there seemed to be something so final about seeing their headstones carved with their birth and death dates that made it all so real to him; perhaps for the first time. Mason supposed this was what people meant when they spoke of closure. For the first time in his life, he realized he was all alone in the world. This realization troubled him more than he could have imagined.

In the distance, Mason saw a long black hearse followed by a similarly dark sedan coming along the gravel lane toward him. They stopped close to where he stood, separated from each other by about ten feet. Two tall bleak looking men in dark suits exited the hearse and walked to the rear where one of them opened the rear tailgate. Mason instantly recognized the one opening the gate. It was Jim Kulp, a member of his graduating class and son of the funeral company's original founder, Bradford Kulp. Jim had apparently taken over the family business as Mason and most townspeople assumed he would.

Mason wondered who the poor soul in the back of the hearse might be. Then the doors to the black sedan opened and four strangers in similar dark suits got out and joined the other two behind the hearse. Looking like sentinels, they lined up in formation, three on each side and slowly began sliding the casket from the hearse as its handles passed along the line.

Then Mason saw a weeping woman exiting the back of the sedan wearing a dark dress and black scarf over her head. To his shock, he realized it was his cousin Marylyn. Even though he hadn't seen her in close to forty years, she looked every bit as pretty as he had remembered her; much older but nonetheless beautiful. His heart went out to his cousin. He recalled she had married her high school sweetheart, Bernie Walters, and they had been together all these years. Surely, it must be devastating for her to lose him after so long. Then Mason wondered why their kids weren't here, not to mention Bernie's many friends and relatives. Mason assumed, having lived in the area all of his life, Bernie should have had a great procession of cars not just these two pathetic funeral vehicles. He suddenly felt great compassion for his poor cousin.

Mason decided he would approach her and offer his condolences for her loss. He realized he would likely have to introduce himself as she hadn't seen him in so long and she would likely not recognize him. He walked up and stood beside her as the pallbearers slowly walked the casket over toward the graveyard.

He said, "Marylyn? It's me... I'm sorry... about Bernie... I guess... Jeez... I just don't know what to say." He raised his hand to place it consolingly on her shoulder but stopped short when he heard her speak his name.

"Oh, Mason." Marylyn said with a sigh.

Mason was surprised. "Why... um... Marylyn... I'm surprised that you recognized me... you know... after all these years."

Marylyn sniffled and dabbed her eyes, "Mason, why did you stay away so long? I remember how we were so close when we were children. You were like a brother to me and I really missed you so much over the years. And now to have to see you... like this." She began to cry again.

"I... I understand, Marylyn." Mason said, sounding contrite. "I missed you as well. I... I often thought about coming home... but I never seemed to get around to it. I'm so terribly sorry."

She blubbered, "I had so hoped you would have been able to meet my daughter, Sarah. I often told her stories about you. We followed your career and cut out articles whenever one appeared in the business section of the newspaper. Sarah's all grown up now and has a daughter of her own. I'm a grandmother. Can you believe it... me a grandmother?"

“That’s... that is very hard to believe, Marylyn.” Mason replied, “I, myself... I never married nor had any children. I guess I could never find the time. But I’m home now, Marylyn, maybe I can find some way to make up for lost time. ”

“So... well... I guess this is our final goodbye, Mason,” She said with tears now running down her cheeks.

Mason was confused and replied, “No, Marylyn. You don’t understand. I’m home now. And I retired last year so if I want, I can be home for good.”

Just then, Jim Kulp walked up to Marylyn and said. “Are you going to be alright now, Mrs. Walters? Is there anything I can get for you before we proceed?”

“Hey, Jim,” Mason said. “It’s me, Mason Fredericks. You probably didn’t recognize me. I haven’t seen you since graduation.”

Marylyn said, “No. But thank you, Jim. I’ll be all right. You can proceed with what you have to do.”

Mason was even more perplexed than previously. “Jim. It’s me, Mason. From high school? There’s no need for you to be so antisocial.”

“I feel sort of strange not having a ceremony or minister for you today, Marylyn.” Jim said, blatantly ignoring Mason. “Are you sure that is what he would have wanted?”

“To be honest, Jim, I’ve no idea what he would have wanted.” Marylyn explained. “He had no living relatives and left no will. I just want to get this over with and head home.”

Mason said, “What do you mean, Marylyn? Bernie had tons of relatives in the area and probably just as many friends. Where are they all?”

Jim said to Marylyn, “Ok. This won’t take but a few minutes. You can wait in the car if you like.”

Marylyn turned and went into the sedan, closing the door behind her. Mason watched the team of dark-suited men standing next to the casket, which now sat next to a recently dug grave he hadn’t noticed before. It was located right next to his older brother’s plot.

“Well, Mason,” Jim said, looking down into the hole as the casket was lowered, “You did your best to stay away all these years and now you’re back for good. Who said you can never come home again?”

I AM ROBERT MURPHY

Jordan Elizabeth Mierek

Reincarnation is the ultimate coming back...

1970

Lorraine clutched the steering wheel tighter. Her heart had never pounded so fiercely. Wires sparked and oil spurted, or that might have been in her imagination. She needed to get out of the car, she needed to run. It might explode like in movies. That happened in real life, didn't it?

She leaned back into her seat, her stomach muscles clenching with the force. The car leaned downwards at a tilt, a tree smashed through the front, branches in the windows. How had the branches avoided her? A trickle of blood tickled her forehead, but nothing hurt, not even that cut.

Part of the roof had peeled back. Had the car rolled down the hill or slid? It had been hard to tell in the dark, in the rain. It should have still been raining, unless she couldn't feel it, besides that tickle and her heartbeat. Lorraine started to brush at the glass on her lap, but hesitated. Her skirt would protect her legs, but she might cut her arms. She squinted at her bare arms. They were covered in something dark. Could it be blood or rain? Maybe it was mud. Maybe the car would sink. The blue car, her twentieth birthday present, ruined now and barely three years old.

Lorraine laughed, but a dull pain had begun in her side. She could stay in the car or fight her door open, make it back up to the road. Would someone else slip over the ravine and crash into her? She should get out... with Robert. She'd picked up Robert from the babysitter's.

"Robert." The hoarse voice couldn't have been hers. "Robert, are you okay? Robbie?"

Lorraine struggled to turn in her seat, wincing at the searing pain in her side. It crept upwards toward her neck. Something wet stuck to the back of her shirt.

A branch stabbed through the backseat where her little boy had been.

1995

“I don’t like cars,” Jeremy wailed. Whenever he got near them, his head pounded and a pain appeared in the center of his chest. His lungs would feel as if something crushed them and heat would drip over his body like liquid.

“Honey.” His mom crouched to his five-year-old height and held his hands. “Jeremy, honey, our car is fine. It won’t hurt you, I promise.”

She might have a black car, but whenever Jeremy got near it, it turned blue. If his parents got him inside, he would pass out. They’d taken to walking places with him, even moved to be closer to the elementary school, but now they had to visit his sick uncle.

Across the state.

“I can’t get in there!” Jeremy shrieked.

“Why not?” His father folded his arms. “Jeremy, it’s just a car. I promise to drive extra careful.” He rolled his eyes toward the sky. “I’m trying to reason with a little kid.”

The black car shifted into a blue one with a boxy shape and the driveway transformed into a rain-slick road. A girl, younger than his mother, stood beside the bumper in a pink skirt and blue shirt. She would be old now, old but alive.

“Robert,” she sang into his mind. “Let’s go home, Robert.”

“I went over the side.” Tears slipped down Jeremy’s cheeks. “I died.”

His father groaned. “Not this story again. We’re taking him to a psychiatrist, I swear.”

~~~~~

“What’s your name?” the man in the suit asked. He held a teddy bear on his lap, and he’d handed Jeremy another one, but Jeremy refused to touch it. It reeked of baby powder.

“Robert Murphy.”

His mother drew in a breath from the back of the room. She wouldn’t like his answer, but he knew it was true. That new name, Jeremy Spring, was someone else.

“No, son,” Suit Man said. “You’re Jeremy Spring. You’re five years old. Nothing bad has ever happened to you in a car.”

Jeremy heard screaming. Metal crunched and tore. Tree branches rattled. He'd awoken from that nightmare for as long as he could remember.

"Where do you live?" Suit Man asked.

Jeremy shook his head. His parents would get angry if he said Seef Town. He didn't live there anymore; now his home was in Lemint City.

"Doctor," his mother said. "Perhaps this is just a little boy playing games."

There are pills that will help," Suit Man said. "He won't have these spells in the car anymore."

2000

"We'll take this detour," Jeremy's father said. "I know it's not the highway, but Seef Town can't be too far out of our way."

Since his parents had begun freezing him with pills, they'd decided to take the vacations they'd missed out on. Jeremy's head lolled to the side as he watched out the window, his limbs too lethargic for much movement.

It sure helped to be out of it once they reached their destination. He almost laughed.

Seef Town had changed. More houses had popped up along the street and the office where his father had worked had been torn down. Jeremy knew he should feel something, but he seemed to float above the car.

His father continued through the town Jeremy didn't recognize and started along the narrow road that followed the hillside. A metal guardrail now protected drivers. "That's where we went off," he mumbled, but his mother's music hid his words.

2005

Jeremy opened the school's Internet browser and typed in "Robert Murphy." His parents watched everything he did at home and his father would yell if they knew he still thought about the other life. They couldn't believe he'd been reincarnated.

Jeremy held his breath as he skimmed the hits until he located a news article about car safety. It listed kids who'd died for not being in a car seat: his name was listed at the bottom. Lorraine might not have used a car seat, but it wouldn't have protected him from the tree branch.

He exited the site and changed the search to “Robert Murphy 1970.” The Seef Town Cemetery came up as a hit, and he clicked to see a photograph of his gravestone.

“Beloved son stolen too soon,” he read aloud. The tears didn’t come anymore. The pills helped numb all the pain. “1967 to 1970.”

2015

Jeremy shut his car door and inhaled the smell of hot pavement. If nothing else, his parents had gotten him over his crippling fear of cars. Jeremy stuck his hands in the pockets of his jeans as he meandered across the street to the two-story white house with the front porch stained a pinkish-brown.

A woman sat on a wicker rocking chair reading a book, a glass of ice tea beside her on a matching table.

Jeremy hesitated on the walkway. “Good morning, ma’am.”

She looked up and her face wrinkled as she smiled. “Morning. What can I do you for?”

The same blue eyes he remembered, as blue as that car. He had to clear his throat to dislodge the forming sob. “Are you Lorraine Murphy?”

According to the Internet, her husband – his first father – had died a few years ago. He’d found her through that obituary, as it labeled her as his widow living in Syracuse, New York. His first father was survived by a son and three daughters. Jeremy had repeated the names aloud during the two hour car ride.

“I am.” She adjusted her turtleneck as she stood up and laid the book on the seat.

Jeremy stepped toward her. He’d forgotten what his first house had looked like, had forgotten everything about the town of old except for that bend in the road. “Ma’am, I’m sorry if this causes you heartache, but I wanted to talk about your son, Robert Murphy.”

She gripped the railing as she moved toward the porch steps. She’d grown so old, her hair cut short and curling, white as a daisy’s flower petals. “It’s been a long while since someone asked. Are you writing a news article? That was what it was about last time.”

Jeremy closed his eyes, drew a breath and met her gaze. “Do you believe in reincarnation?”

She smiled. Lipstick colored her lips; she'd always worn lipstick, he recalled. "I do. Is that you, Robbie?"

Jeremy stumbled backwards, the gravel walkway crunching under his sneakers. He'd assumed she'd be hesitant. She might argue, she might cry. Tears did show in her eyes. He'd never even hoped she'd recognize him. "How..." He gulped. "Yeah, Ma. It's me."

"Robbie." She stopped at the top step and held out her wrinkled hand, fingers gnarled from arthritis. "I'm glad you're here now. I've been waiting for you."

His hands trembled as he clasped hers and lifted them to his mouth to kiss her swollen knuckles. "We had a little white dog named Peppermint." He'd recited what he'd say to prove who he was. "The babysitter gave me the puppy when her dog had a litter. That's where I was when you picked me up, at the babysitter's."

"Hush, Robbie. I know."

"How can you know it's me?" He had the features of his new parents. He didn't think his eyes even looked the same. They'd been blue, like Lorraine's and now his were hazel.

"After the accident, I was stuck in the car and I was crying. Oh, Robbie, was I crying. I could see that you... No matter. It was just me and I didn't know what to do. I'd lost my little Robbie." She brushed her fingertips over his cheek. "An angel appeared beside me and said that you'd be brought back and that you'd come find me, that you'd remember that life with me. I've been waiting for you ever since. Welcome home, Robbie."

## A MOTHER KNOWS

*Nikko Lee*

*From death to life, via a mother's love, this child came back*

After five years of fertility treatments, it took the Infection and a year of unprotected sex in the wilds of Maine to finally conceive. 'Our little miracle' you called it. I didn't think it was possible for us to bring a baby into a world where survival was a daily accomplishment.

Over months, my breasts and belly swelled. The certainty of loss was replaced with the fear of giving birth to such a fragile being. Every day offered a fresh dose of horror and uncountable ways for a child to die.

I imagined a thousand deaths. You built a crib out from scraps of wood that was once a table.

You saw every kick as an affirmation of life. I doubted I even felt them.

I refused to even think about a name. You wanted to name her after your mother.

When the kicking stopped, I couldn't bring myself to tell you. I left while you were out hunting.

I bore the pain alone and hated that you would want to try again. No bigger than my hand, our daughter was born without a cry or a breath. The misshapen heart beneath her translucent skin would never beat again. I held her to my breasts and wept for a dream I did not even know that I wanted to come true.

Then I felt it move. A tiny mouth latched onto my skin. The tugging pull of her hunger was undeniable, but milk was not the nourishment she needed. What else could I do but feed her? A mother knows what her baby needs.

## POST RESURRECTION BLUES

*Rich Dodgin*

*Sometimes you may wish you hadn't come back...*

'You mean I've been in a coma, right?' I asked, convinced I must have misheard.

The woman, Diane - who said she was my support worker - was a young pale twenty something with dark hair so thick and messy it could have had birds nesting in it. She smiled. It was the sort of patient yet patronising smile that parents use when young children fail to grasp a basic concept.

'No, Mr Henderson,' she stated slowly, as if trying to ensure there was no room for misunderstanding, 'I mean you were dead.'

I didn't reply. What could I say? It's a hell of a thing to be told that you've been dead for 8 years.

She smiled that smile again, 'Neil. Can I call you Neil?' she asked, not waiting for my answer, 'I know this is hard to believe. But it's true. Now tell me, how did you get here? What's the last thing you remember?'

I was getting annoyed now. 'Easy,' I started, 'I was... that is...' And I realised with horror that I had no idea of where I'd been or what I'd been doing before I'd woken up in the hospital bed I now sat in.

Diane smiled sympathetically, 'Don't worry, Neil. Sometimes the shock of coming back can mean a lack of recollection of the... final moments. Maybe this will help.' She opened up the folder on her lap, pulled out a document, and handed it to me.

It was a death certificate. My death certificate. Cause of death: multiple gunshots to the body. Jesus Christ. 'If this is all some sort of elaborate joke, it's not very funny,' I said angrily.

But that was when it all came flooding back.

~~~

I was just finishing the paperwork from another busy shift when the phone rang. I hesitated, letting the room echo with the loud ringing as I toyed with the idea of ignoring it. Then, looking at my watch and sighing loudly, I took the call.

‘Officer Henderson?’ asked a gruff male voice.

‘Yes. How can I help?’

‘The trafficking case. I can tell you what you need to know.’

‘What? Who is this?’

The old Andersfield warehouse at the docks,’ they’d rasped, ‘Meet me there in twenty minutes. Any later and I’ll be gone.’

With that, the line went dead.

Shit.’

Although we’d rescued five women from a brothel on London Road, I was having no luck finding out who was behind the actual trafficking operation that had brought them into the country.

Was this finally the lead I needed? There was only one way to find out. I’d grabbed my car keys, raced outside to my unmarked car and driven across the city in a desperate rush.

I got there with just minutes to spare, pulling up outside the abandoned warehouse. It was starting to get dark and in the half light the crumbling buildings and knee high weeds looked like something out of an apocalyptic science fiction movie.

I wasn’t completely sure what I was doing here, following a random lead. The case was obviously getting to me more than I’d realised. So much so that I hadn’t even followed basic protocol and reported in.

I got out of the car, glanced about to see if anyone was watching and then made my way over to the Andersfield building.

The main door was all boarded up, but round the back of the building I found a way in through a hole in the wall.

I clambered through the gap and found myself in a large open space. It was dark and gloomy, the only light coming from the grime covered skylights. I cursed myself for not bringing a flashlight and stood there for a moment as my eyes adjusted to the dimness.

‘Hello?’ I asked loudly. The only reply was the echo of my voice in the darkness. Then I heard movement behind me, from outside.

I turned and was greeted with the blinding light from a torch. ‘Hello?’ I asked, as I held up my hand to shade my eyes.

‘Henderson?’ It was the gruff voice from the phone call.

The torch was still shining into my eyes and by squinting I could just make out the outline of a tall stocky man.

‘Yes.’

And that was when everything erupted in an explosion of noise, light, and pain as the gun was unloaded into me. The force of the bullets knocked me backwards, and I hit the floor in a crumpled bleeding mess...

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I remembered. It had been a trap and it had cost me my life. There was no way I could have survived. Yet sitting there in the hospital bed there was no sign of bullet trauma. I had no injuries. Not a single scratch. I looked at Diane, finally believing her. ‘I’m back from the dead. My god.’

She didn’t reply, just nodded.

Then I realised something. None of it was a shock to her. In fact it was very much business as normal. ‘You aren’t surprised by any of this,’ I stated. ‘Why not?’

‘Because my job is dealing with cases like yours Neil. Because what has happened to you is far from unique.’

Diane went on to tell me how, a few years after I’d died, the first cases of resurrection had started to be reported from around the globe.

At first people were incredibly sceptical but as more and more cases were reported, investigated, and ultimately proven, it gradually became an accepted part of everyday life. Within a few months, the reappearance of lost loved ones had become a daily occurrence and society started to adapt accordingly.

As she explained this, Diane handed me a number of newspaper and magazine clippings from her folder to illustrate what she was saying. It was mind blowing stuff and a couple of times I felt like pinching myself.

Five years and 150 million worldwide resurrections later and still no one was able to explain why it was happening, or why some people resurrected and some hadn’t. It didn’t happen in any sort of logical order either - sometimes the resurrectee was someone who had died years or decades previously, sometimes it was someone who had died only a few weeks or months earlier.

What all those returning did have in common was that none of them had died before 4th September 1983, none of them had died of old age and none of them came back with any sign of what had killed them – be it trauma or illness.

When they came back, each person appeared in a place that had been “special” to them, naked and in a coma-like sleep that would last between 12 and 36 hours, from which they couldn’t be roused.

‘Where the hell did I appear?’ I asked sharply, handing Diane back the clippings as I did so. ‘It wasn’t in the middle of the street or something, was it?’ I had no idea where my “special” place might be.

She laughed, ‘No, nothing like that, Neil. You appeared in the house you and your wife used to live in.’

I breathed a huge sigh of relief at that, ‘Thank god.’

‘In bed with the new home owner,’ she continued, deadpan.

‘What?’

‘Yes, a Mrs...’ she looked at her notes, ‘Greene. A lovely elderly woman. In her eighties. She was rather shocked, to say the least.’

I groaned and put my head in my hands.

‘Don’t worry about it, Neil. It happens a lot.’

‘Easy for you to say...’ Then I picked up on what she’d just said, ‘Hang on. You said “the house you and your wife *used* to live in.” What do you mean? Isn’t my wife living there anymore?’

‘You’ve been gone eight years, Neil. She doesn’t live there anymore.’

‘Is that why she isn’t here? Doesn’t she know I’m back?’

Diane shook her head. ‘No. We’ve contacted her, she’s aware you’re back.’

‘So why isn’t she here?’

‘I don’t know the answer to that.’

‘Have you got her number and a phone I can use, so I can call her?’

‘Sorry, Neil,’ she said apologetically, ‘but I’m not allowed to give you her contact details. Your marriage became null and void the day you died and her life will have moved on. She may not want to see you. If she does want to contact you, she’ll let us know.’

‘And if she doesn’t?’

Diane shrugged, ‘Then she won’t.’

‘Great.’ I was less than happy, but I could tell there was no point arguing. I’d just have to hope Michelle got in touch sometime soon.



Apartment 2734 was pokey and cramped and decorated throughout in a dreary beige colour. It was soulless and felt more like a waiting room than someone’s home. The front door opened into a combined lounge and kitchenette, beyond that was a single bedroom which had just enough room for the double bed and wardrobe and a bathroom the size of a phone box. It had been furnished with the basics, but it all looked cheap and tawdry.

‘I know it’s not perfect,’ said Diane, seeing my expression, ‘but you’ll be able to make it more homely. With the constant stream of arrivals the government is struggling to provide housing for everyone. You should be grateful.’

‘I know,’ I said, ‘I am. But it’s just so grotty.’ Even the view from the window was depressing. We were on the 27th floor, but all I could see were the other 7 tower blocks – each an identical looking 70 storey monstrosity – and the vast central concrete courtyard that all the blocks looked down on. Everything was drab and grey, no sign of grass or the sort of landscaped gardens I’d hoped for. No wonder those we had passed on our way into the building had looked desolate and dejected. Life here would be spirit crushing.

‘Everything you will ever need is all here on site,’ she explained. ‘As well as the apartments themselves, each block contains shops selling everything residents need, as well as a cinema, library, health centre, several restaurants, bars and a ‘social club’.

She handed me an envelope of garish vouchers that were the currency used by all the shops and facilities on the estate. As the new underclass, our place was clearly in the estate and not beyond.

Until the authorities had finished reviewing my case and my old identity was re-instated, I was stuck there. With a new identity. No qualifications or job experience. No money. And, unless she got in touch, no wife.

‘You can go off-site,’ said Diane, ‘but there are some people who won’t take kindly if they find out you’re resurrected. I would advise against it. For now, stay here and give yourself time to get used to things.’

She left a few minutes later, telling me she'd be in touch and reminding me that I could call her if I had any questions or issues.



I couldn't really face the thought of shopping but I needed a few things, so I braved a trip down to the shops on the first floor. It was a soul destroying experience. The shops were full of cheap tat and those fellow shoppers I saw all had a haunted look to them. Already I was starting to feel like one of the damned.

I bought some cheap looking clothes, toiletries, bedding and enough food to keep me going for the next couple of days, then scurried back to the sanctity of my cramped and stifling apartment.

For company as much as anything I switched on the wall screen and flipped through the channels, trying to find something suitably uplifting to drag me out of the black mood I found myself in.

I stopped when I reached the "Resurrection Channel" and sat mesmerised by the latest resurrection related news stories from around the world.

... in Romania a man believed to be the resurrection of executed dictator Nicolae Ceausescu was beaten and killed by angry mob in Bucharest on November 1st. He turned out to be a retired bus driver... in China, the ever controversial Chinese One-Child Policy was amended on December 15th to make it illegal for bereaved parents to have another child. This is in response to what Chinese officials say is the large number of resurrected children whose reappearance have resulted in a families with more than one child... in the USA a man on Death Row has been acquitted following the resurrection of the female victim who identified another individual as her killer. Now free from prison, the innocent man is suing state prosecutors for submitting false evidence against him...

I shook my head, still finding it hard to accept the new world in which I was now living. The miracle of resurrection was an everyday occurrence and yet there were still so many unanswered questions. Why had I resurrected? Were those of us who'd come back, as some religious groups claimed, chosen by God? Or were we, as others believed, fallen angels who'd been kicked out of Heaven? Maybe we'd never know.

I flicked through a few more channels and was even more surprised by what I saw next - a music video featuring Paul McCartney... and a very much alive John Lennon. They were sitting together on a beach, each playing a guitar and singing a song called "Hey John". It was an inoffensive pop-song that had a subtle hint of The Beatles sound to it. The lyrics were a bit cheesy, dealing with the miracle of Lennon's resurrection and Paul's joy at being reunited with his "musical brother."

McCartney was looking very old, but Lennon looked no older than he had when he'd died. Side by side they look like father and son rather than two contemporaries.

When the video finished, the female presenter reported that "John Lennon has been quoted as saying he won't be doing any other material with Paul McCartney. He now wants to get on with something new and exciting and has started work on a thrash n bass album."

Wow. Now that was something I couldn't wait to hear.

~~~

The new few days were spent in a similar vein as I continued to try and adjust to my new home and life. I watched a lot of TV, learning more about the way in which the world had changed since my death and how it was coping with the constant influx of the resurrected.

I visited the rest of the estate and got a feel for my new neighbourhood. Diane was right. Staying in the immediate vicinity helped me to keep grounded and gave me the time I needed to settle in.

But I was lonely and itching to get out and about and see some of the Edinburgh I remembered. I still hadn't heard anything from Michelle, my – now ex – wife and that hurt a lot. I guessed she'd tried to move on in her life as she was never the sort to let things get her down. But still. We'd been married for seven years.

We had no kids and both of my parents had died in a car crash when I'd been in my late teens – and as yet neither had resurrected. So I had no other immediate family apart from Michelle. I did have an Aunt and Uncle and some cousins, but they lived down in Devon. I saw little point in contacting them.

I'd never had many friends. The nature of the job as a policeman meant strange working hours and, as a result, keeping up social

commitments was difficult.

I decided to give Andrew Black a call. He was an old colleague and someone I'd occasionally gone for beers with. Seeing him for a couple of hours would get me off the estate and back towards something approaching normality. Not only that, but if anyone could help me locate Michelle, I knew he could.

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'It was a real shock when you died, man, I can tell you,' said Andrew taking a drink of his real ale. 'Really shook up everyone at the station. To shoot you like a dog and dump you in a ditch like that. Bastards.'

We were in the Wally Dug, a quiet city centre bar that Andrew had suggested as a meeting place. I felt a little uncomfortable being off the estate but, despite Diane's warning, I'd had no trouble en route and the other drinkers weren't interested in our conversation.

'You'd have been pleased with the turnout for the funeral though. A really nice service – up at Corstorphine Hill Cemetery. Lovely place. You should pop up and have a look sometime.'

I wasn't sure what to say to that. Visiting my grave wasn't something I'd even considered. Instead I asked the question I'd been waiting to ask, 'Whoever killed me was never caught?'

He shook his head and grimaced, 'No. Believe me, trying to find whoever was responsible got a lot of focus from the force, but we didn't get anywhere.'

'What about the trafficking case I was working on – did we ever find out who was behind that?'

Andrew sighed. 'They put Danny Hayward on it, but he didn't get anywhere. The case was closed a few weeks after your funeral.' He paused for a second, then added, 'you never got anywhere yourself with it, man?'

I shook my head, 'No. I never saw who it was that killed me. Shit. Well, I guess that's it then. The case is eight years cold.' I took a long deep drink of my pint. 'I really don't like the idea that whoever killed me is still out there. But I guess I'm no threat to them now...'

'Mate,' said Andrew, 'You've been given an amazing gift – another life. Forget about the past and start afresh.'

‘Yeah, you’re probably right. But to enable me to do that, I need to ask you a favour.’

‘Sure. Fire away.’

I sighed, ‘Michelle hasn’t been in touch, despite assurances from my support worker that she’s been told I’m back. Could you get her address for me?’

Andrew raised his eyebrows at this.

‘I just want to talk to her,’ I explained, ‘If she’s not interested in ever seeing me again, I’ll accept that. But I need to speak to her.’

‘Yeah I get that. But you realise of course that what you’re asking me to do is illegal.’

‘I know. I wouldn’t ask unless I had to.’

He sighed. ‘Sure. Least I can do, man. No problem. Give me a day or two.’

‘Thanks. I really appreciate that.’

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Call me paranoid, but someone had blown me away eight years earlier and, although it sounded like things were dead and buried, I wasn’t. From what I’d seen on TV, if someone was to kill me, I might resurrect again. I might not. I’d already died once and didn’t like the idea of dying again.

The following day I bought myself a handgun from one of the more dodgy characters on the estate. I recognised Davy McInnes from my time with the force - we’d suspected him of selling stolen guns, but he’d been killed in a gang hit before we’d been able to prove anything. Luckily he didn’t recognise me and a quick chat confirmed he was still in the same trade. After a bit of negotiation we agreed on a price and I handed him most of my remaining vouchers in return for a battered looking Browning 9mm.

With that done, I made my way to Corstorphine Hill Cemetery, the gun heavy inside my coat pocket. Part of me hated myself for buying an illegal firearm, but having it lifted my spirits considerably – because now I knew I could defend myself if I needed to.

~~~

Unlike the majority of the neatly maintained plots, my grave was unkempt and overgrown, half hidden under an abundance of weeds and assorted debris. The marble headstone didn't even have an epitaph - just my name, and the dates of my birth and death.

Standing there, shivering against the cold wind that blew through the cemetery, I felt my sense of despair start to overwhelm me. Was that how little I'd been missed after my death? Had I really meant so little to my family and friends? My old body was somewhere beneath my feet, rotting away and I found myself wondering if I should have stayed dead. Jesus. What the fuck was I even doing in the cemetery? Looking for answers? A morbid sense of curiosity had drawn me there I suppose, but standing there I knew it hadn't been a good idea.

I turned and left without a backwards glance, the *caw caw caw* of the crows mocking me as I fled.

~~~

Andrew called later that day, 'I've got the info you asked for.'

'Excellent.'

'27 Aberdour Road.'

'Thanks.'

'No problem, man. Good luck.'

~~~

Aberdour Road was near Holyrood. The houses were all large, impressive buildings with sweeping gravel driveways and beautifully maintained gardens. The folks who lived there were all clearly money people. Michelle was obviously doing well for herself.

Feeling uncomfortably out of place in my cheap clothes, I arrived outside a large detached house with a double garage, a couple of yew trees and a sign that read "Olidan Dreams". I walked up the driveway and rang the doorbell.

A moment later the door opened, and there she was. Blonde, slim, and immaculately dressed in jeans and an angora pullover.

'Hello?' she said. It took a second for it to register who I was and then she made an "O" with her mouth, and stepped back a pace. 'Neil?



What are you doing here?’

It wasn’t quite the warm welcoming reunion I’d been playing over in my mind on the way over, but I suppose it must’ve been a shock for her. Even though she had known I’d been back for almost a week now. ‘You haven’t been in touch, Michelle,’ I said, ‘So I thought I’d come and see you.’

‘Why?’

‘Isn’t it obvious? Because I want to speak to you. To see if things between us are...’ I nodded towards the open doorway behind her, ‘Look, can we talk about things inside?’

‘No. I don’t think that would be appropriate,’ she said, shaking her head.

‘Why ever not?’

She sighed, ‘Because I’m married, Neil. And my son is asleep.’

‘What?’ Everything suddenly sounded far away, and for a second I thought I was going to faint. ‘Married? Son?’ I managed in a croaking voice.

Michelle let out a short bark-like laugh, ‘What? You thought that all these years I’d been sad and lonely, pining for you, my dead husband?’

‘Well... something like that... yes.’

Another laugh. ‘Oh, come on, Neil. Our relationship was dead long before you were.’

I shook my head in confusion. None of this was going the way I’d hoped it would. ‘What are you saying, Michelle? I know we had our difficulties and, yes, our arguments... even fights, but...’ I threw my arms in the air in frustration, ‘I thought we still loved each other.’

She sighed, ‘Neil. I used to think that too. That I loved you and that, maybe, things would get better between us...’

‘But?’

‘But. Then you were killed. To be honest, it was actually a relief.’

I opened my mouth to reply to that, but no sound came out. I felt like I’d just been punched in the gut.

She sighed again. ‘Look, I’m sorry if this is a shock but I have a new life now.’ She caught herself and laughed – not the cruel bark, but the more gentle laugh I remembered from our time together, ‘Ok. Not literally a new life like you have, Neil, but you know what I mean. I’m married now. I’m

happier than I've been in a long time. Happier than I ever was with you. I'm sorry if that hurts but it's true.'

There was nothing I could say. I just stood there dumbly, wounded and humiliated, fighting back the tears so that I wouldn't make even more of a fool of myself than I had by visiting her in the first place.

From behind her, I could hear the sound of a young child crying.

She turned and looked into the house, then turned back to me. 'I have to go. You've been given another chance, Neil. Forget about me. About us. Go and find yourself a nice girl and settle down.'

She closed the door in my face.

~~~~

I called Andrew.

'How'd it go?' he asked.

I told him what had happened.

He sighed, 'Too bad, man, but maybe it's a good thing. Force you to get on and start your new life.'

'I suppose so.' Maybe he was right. 'If I'm going to do that I need to one last thing.'

'What's that?'

'Visit the place where I died,' I said, 'Just so I can draw a final line under it all and accept things the way they are. I guess that's a bit weird.'

'No, I think I can understand that.'

'Will you come with me? I'm not sure I can do this myself - I know my support worker wouldn't think it healthy.'

'To the warehouse with you?' There was a silence while he mulled this over, then, 'Sure. Why not? I'll pick you up when I come off shift, about eight thirty.'

~~~~

'So this is it,' Andrew stated dryly as we pulled up outside the ruin-like shell of what had been the warehouse, 'What a dump.'

I had to agree with him. Things looked even worse than they had eight years ago. It was an urban wasteland of rusted metal, decaying brickwork and savage looking weeds. The warehouse itself looked like it

was about to collapse. Large parts of the walls had fallen away to reveal the rubble strewn building beyond. I was surprised it hadn't been demolished and the area redeveloped.

I looked at Andrew. He had a frown on his face that suggested he didn't think this was a good idea.

‘This won't take long. I just want a quick look,’ I said, ‘Come on.’

We stepped through a gaping hole in the crumbling wall and into what was left of the warehouse. It was a complete bombsite but, unlike eight years earlier this time there was ample light - through the large gaps in the rusted corrugated iron roof and the gaping holes in the walls.

It brought it all back. I remembered cursing that I hadn't told anyone where I was going. I'd been in such a rush to meet the person who was going to help me solve the case that I'd failed to follow established procedure. It had cost me everything.

Andrew took a few steps towards the centre of the building, glancing round us as he did so. A sudden horrible realisation hit me and I felt an icy shiver down my back.

‘Stop right there,’ I said, pulling the gun out of my pocket and pointing it at Andrew. He turned round to see why we'd stopped, and his eyes widened in surprise.

‘What the hell you doing, Neil?’

I smiled grimly at him.

‘I never told anyone that I was meeting my mysterious informer, Andrew. I was in such a hurry to get here that I didn't have time. No one knew I was coming. No one. They found my body dumped in a ditch miles from here. Yet somehow you know about this place. I'd always wondered if there was someone in a position of trust or power behind the scenes, helping keep the whole trafficking operation from being investigated by the authorities. You were worried I was going to find you out. So you set me up, you fucker, and had me killed.’

I was half expecting him to deny it - was half hoping he'd say something to convince me otherwise. But he just stood there.

‘Was it you here that day?’ I asked. I was almost shouting now. ‘Was it you who pulled the trigger, or did you get someone else to do your dirty work?’

He sighed. ‘It was me, Neil. What the fuck else was I meant to do? You always were whiter than white. Too fucking honest for your own

good.'

I spat on the ground. 'You asshole.'

He smiled a sick self satisfied smile. 'If I hadn't done it, someone else would have.' He shrugged, 'So what happens now? You going to call me in? Get me sent down?'

I shook my head. 'I should. You deserve to rot in jail. But for what you've done to me, by killing me... destroyed my career, destroyed my marriage... No, I'm going to do the same thing to you.'

I think that was the moment when he realised it was over. I saw fear on his face for the first time. He held up his hands in surrender. 'Come on, Neil, no need for that, man.'

I clicked the safety off and the fear on his face turned to anger. Self righteous arrogant anger. 'If I come back, Neil, I'll be coming after you. I'll get you for this, you motherfucker,' he said with real spite and venom in his voice.

'If you come back.' I said and smiled. 'I'll take that chance.'

I pulled the trigger.

# ENCELADUS

*Gary Budgen*

## *Coming back through space and time...*

Even when she is here, she is not here. I say to her: “What is it? Are you okay?” And the wistful smile that plays across her face; or the scowl at being interrupted are equal signs of her irritation at the distraction. I have drawn her back, or at least attempted to, but I believe that it is not my presence that truly irks her but rather the presence of a reality she no longer has any interest in.

~~~

Tallis is searching. He would like there to be a physical log, a dusty thing, perhaps filled with carefully inked maps and charts, its pages frayed at the edge, bound in leather. The station is deserted, emptied long ago by the diaspora. Eventually the structure would decay, the air deplete as the generators stopped. One day the entire biosphere would succumb to the chill of Pluto.

Tallis moves through the station under the emergency lighting, which had activated when he'd entered the outer capillary junction, triggering long dormant bioluminescent cells into life on the ceiling and on the walls.

It wasn't a large base and Tallis locates the command centre quickly.

But there is no log book at a Captain's table, only a set of instructions stored in the firmware of the mainframe. The machine is long dead but he dismantles the panel and takes out the sliver of solid-state memory. In his portable reader he brings up the file:

Meet me in the Rose Café. 3pm.

She has left a message for him. She knows he is coming back.

Outside it is snowing as Pluto has begun to spin away from the sun and the gases solidify and fall like walls of static on the ground. It is time to be moving on.



The Rose Café is one of those little gems you find in the back streets of London, deep in the centre of the city but tucked away from the main thoroughfares, squeezed—perhaps—between an empty travel agents and a dusty stationery shop.

I watch from across the street as she sits at a table alone, a cup of tea or coffee (no, it would be tea) in front of her. I can see quite clearly through the window. Her face is framed between the O and the S of the faded gold letters stencilled on the window pane. She looks almost like the first time I saw her, only a few more laughter lines, ripples around the eyes. I cannot see these from where I am but it is easy for me to fill in the details.

After a while she calls the waiter over and says something. The waiter shakes his head, holds his hands out as though to apologise. He looks at her sadly.

She waits alone.

When she rises to leave I depart. She will come out into the street and I will not be there.



Inwards then, towards the great bodies of the Solar System, the opposite direction of the diaspora. Tallis passes Titan, the captured moon of Neptune, spinning always in the wrong direction. A planet that originated somewhere else entirely and found its way here to settle down as a moon. They found a buried alien city there, frozen beneath the methane ice. Xeno-archaeologists carved out careers for centuries before the diaspora took them away with everyone else.



“What did you do today?” I ask.

It is unusual for us to speak lately. It is exceptional for us to speak across the dinner table. She pauses for a moment, examining the piece of meat on the end of her fork; the sauce—quite delicious—glistens.

“Nothing,” she says.

She does not mention the café, the prearranged rendezvous, all the waiting she indulged in.



There is a world called Enceladus. It is a moon of Saturn riven with tectonic activity so that while there are regions of old landscape, cratered and broken, there are younger lands, smoothed by the sub-surface movements of rock and ice. At the poles of Enceladus great plumes of water and dust spew up from underground lakes; the particles go up and freeze, drift into space and feed the rings of Saturn.

There is an abandoned city called Samarkand, tunnels carved along the edges of a far stretching ravine. Somewhere in caves there is the mausoleum of the terra-formers and pioneers, those who failed to tame this world. There is a tombstone there.

It takes Tallis all day to find it, worming his way through the complex of tunnels and passages, wanting to discard the vac-suit as though it were so much chrysalis skin. The only light here is from his headset, which picks out this or that feature, carved masonry, the worn statues of men in suits like his. Then there is the statue of a woman, bareheaded so that braids of stone fall abundantly around her shoulders.

There is an inscription.

I waited, it says, for hours. My tea grew cold. Why didn't you come?



The next day she waits again. It is what she has become, a woman who waits in a café. I watch. I can't keep missing work like this but I must see if he comes. Will he wander down the backstreets taking awkward steps in his vac-suit? Is this the world where he, at last, might shed that suit, drop it on the tarmac and so at last embrace life?

He does not come and I almost feel sorry for her, sat there with the waiter now eyeing her with pity. She is no longer the beautiful stranger who is waiting, she is a rather sad and pathetic thing, shipped up alone, not wanted.



As much as Tallis wants to move on, he is enchanted by Enceladus. When he comes out of the caverns of Samarkand to walk in the great gorge, Saturn is in the sky above. So close it ceases to be an emblem, a symbol, its weight in space, its colour and splendour banishes any attempt to look at anything else.

He might be the last human being to ever see it. When he is gone its beauty will cease to exist as it spins on regardless.



I think we need to talk, I will say. I want to know what is wrong. I want to know how I have disappointed you. But I can't say these words. When I look at her now I realise I hardly know her anymore. All I know is the surface: the regions along her hairline where the hair is swept back, the curve of her eyebrow and her delicate eyelashes. I have always loved her eyelashes.

We sit through another mostly silent dinner. We lie in bed together untouched.

The next day I have to go to work. Each minute of every meaningless task is irritating so that I want to scream. She will be at the Rose Café and her lover may well have arrived.

When I get home I detect a difference in her, a change in the expressions she hides just beneath her features. It is just detectable in the infinitesimal curl at the edge of her lips. Are the waters glistening at the edges of her eyes sorrow or fulfilment?

Did you meet him today? I want to say. Did your space boy finally show up?

But I say nothing. We eat again in silence and I study her face, the movement of her jaw as she chews; her unfathomable eyes. It is impossible to cross the boundary.



He knew that somehow he would have to leave Enceladus and so no longer gaze on Saturn, no longer watch the great plumes rise up to her. He is coming back. Back to Earth to alight in a city and find what he needs to

find. Surely all the cities are empty, become jungles, split with green. Yet somehow, across the ruins he will search out that particular street, will walk along it dropping his helmet to clatter on the road, to roll to rest on weeds growing through the cracks. And then at last he would approach the Rose Café.

THE WELL OF SCARLET TEARS

James Arthur Anderson

Coming back coming back coming back...

System rebooted.

The astronomers call it the Darcus Nebula, but to Symone Stubb and millions of romantics like him, it was and always will be the Well of Scarlet Tears.

Legend told of a time long ago, before the coming of lightships, even before the Commonwealth, when the aging SunMother could no longer support nine children. One by one they sickened and died, becoming uninhabited wastelands. Only Darcus, her closest and favorite daughter, still sustained life upon her grey soil.

But Darcus grew wicked and allowed her living creatures to become gods in their own right, living creatures of pure thought, of pure psychic energy, without form or substance. The SunMother, a jealous god, could not contain her grief; she began to weep scarlet tears of blood, tears that spread out across the lightyears to swallow her children in a living pool of flame and destruction.

Darcus was the first to be consumed. Her creatures, beings of pure energy, perished in a sudden flash of pain, shock and terror as they were engulfed by the SunMother's tears. Thousands of years later, the agonized screams of the mindbeings could still be heard by those sensitive enough to listen.

Or so the legends said.

Symone Stubb believed in legends. And he was determined to reach the center of the Well of Scarlet Tears even though its blood-red gasses were shunned by the most daring spacefarer.

It was the screams, they said. The screams of the dead. They were so pathetic and so beautiful that they drove men mad. And no one who returned from the fringes of the Well was sane enough to explain why.

But Stubb was half-mad already. And he believed in the legends. I should know. I've shared his mind for the year-long trip to the Well. And I've shared his madness ever since.

I am the model G nanoweight computer-bot with the series five B mind hook-up. Purely state of the art. It was my job to monitor Stubb's thoughts and protect him from madness. I was to prepare an account of what transpired at the Well of Scarlet Tears. I'm afraid I've failed in at least part of my mission, though I have completed my account, such as it is. Unfortunately, the Well has driven me mad also.

Most of the trip was routine, uneventful. The memory log is clear on that point. While the lightship sped across the galaxy, Stubb slept in his plasma bath. Time passed like fluorescent sand through the curved hourglass of space. I guided the ship on an unchanging course, monitored the life support systems and listened for screams.

They were soft at first, distant, almost silent. I would not have noticed them if I had not been listening. I strained against the confines of my circuitry to hear them. They were a soft, haunting melody, the music of a sad, proud race that had lost in the cosmic game of fate. The screams seemed to cry out to me, asking the awful, unanswerable question, "why?"

It took the better part of a year to reach the fringes of the Well. During that time I shared Stubb's dreams and lived his nightmares. I was with him always and his mind was an open databank to me. I prodded and probed until I knew him better than he knew himself, knowing and understanding his deepest and darkest secrets, secrets that he had even kept from himself.

He was, indeed, half-mad. We had speculated that his madness would make him immune to the screams. At least we were partly right.

Stubb was an explorer of the ancient variety, an anachronism who travelled to the ends of the universe simply to see what was beyond the next star. His madness served him well—in an age of drones and bots and data tubes, explorers were a rare breed, unnecessary, in fact and Stubb was rare even for his profession. Some sought knowledge, some sought God, and some sought adventure. Stubb pursued all of these and more. He had no use for fame, wealth, or power. Yet without even trying, he had obtained all three.

He was obsessed with discovery. I searched his mind and dissected his psyche, peeling back the layers one at a time until I found his dreams.

He sought that one elusive thing that humankind has craved since the first primitive man had stepped out of his cave and gazed at the stars in wonder.

Stubb was convinced that there was an intelligent life out there somewhere, a benevolent, omniscient life that would save humankind from itself. And he was determined to find it.

Some might call it a search for God, but to Stubb it was a search for truth and salvation. As I probed his mind during the journey, though, I realized that even he didn't really know what he was searching for.

Inhabited planets had been found in the universe, of course. How could they not with the development of the lightships? Over a thousand of them had been discovered, yet all their life forms had been humanoid, descended from a common forgotten ancestor who had conquered the stars millions of years ago.

But Stubb believed. He believed in the ancient legends of a supreme race that had kept humankind from destroying itself back in the days when the earth was still young. He'd devoted his entire life to studying these legends and tracing their roots and origins. After a half century of this work he was convinced the legends were true, at least in some small part. And all of the legends, all of the myths, all of the stories led to the same place—the Well of Scarlet Tears.

Stubb had everything a man could want, yet his life was worthless without the answers he searched for. He meant to find those answers. He would reach the center of the Well where no explorer had ventured before and he would listen to the death throes of this alien race of mindbeings, learn their tragic story and discover if any of them had somehow survived. With luck, and my help, he would return to earth sane enough to use what he'd learned.

He had the best equipment, the finest lightship of the times and of course, yours truly, the Model G computer who would save himself from the demons of his own mind.

Once we entered the fringes of the Well the screams grew louder and clearer. They didn't bother me yet, though they disturbed Stubb's restful sleep and drove him to hideous nightmares.

The screams were powerful, they were music and they were magic. They were totally unlike anything my circuits were programmed or prepared for. I had listened to human music, of course. But this was different. It was an assault of pure energy, both beautiful and horrible at the

same time, depressingly wishful, longing, and accusing. My circuits felt guilty to possess the tiny bit of electrical life they owned while these creatures of perfection were extinct.

Once we had entered the fringes of the Well, I awoke Stubb as my programming dictated. I couldn't ignore the screams, but I could work around them. Secretly I feared for Stubb and for myself, but I am only a machine and not programmed for such things.

Once I had woken him, cleaned him off and attended to his nourishment, then he began to listen to the screams. It was bad for him and I tried to make him stop. He silenced me and began talking to himself.

"Stubb, old boy," he said, scratching his grey beard. "You've done it. You've really done it. Just hear those voices! A symphony of despair crying out to all the universe to listen.

"Are you getting this, computer? I want it all in your memory drives. Every note. Every chord. I want it all, every beautiful bit of it."

I assured him I was recording it all, not only the music but his thoughts as well. I didn't tell him what it was doing to me. I was programmed to obey instructions and I did.

Actually, they weren't voices at all. They were screams. I monitored and recorded them, though in no language that my memory chips could understand. Still, I could sense their meaning. If I had explained it to Stubb, it might have destroyed him. But my job was just to record, not to explain.

When we made the jump from hyperspace, the screams were deafening, vibrating in my silicon chips like a reverse charge of power. The portholes glowed with a ghastly red hue as the scarlet gasses ebbed and flowed with the tune of the screams.

Stubb covered his ears, dropping to his knees in pain. The screams wouldn't stop. They were in his mind, not in his ears. When I tried to speak to him, the screams became stronger. They were no longer beautiful, but terrible. They were a window of death and we both experienced the instant of terrible, painful destruction. I, a computer who had never known life, knew what it was like to die.

The tears rolled down Stubb's cheeks as he experienced the destruction of a world, a world so far advanced in thought and culture that it was almost beyond comprehension. The melody was terrible, a symphony

of millions, each singing a single note of endless despair. Stubb closed his eyes and cried like a baby.

As for me, I am not programmed to cry.

It seemed to last for hours and then it ended like a flame snuffed out by a gloved hand. Stubb crawled to his feet and wiped his eyes.

“It’s over now,” he said, exhausted. “And I think I’m still sane. Did you record it, computer?”

I told him that I had. I didn’t mention my own state of mind.

“Good. Then we’ve passed the test. The answer waits for us at the center of the Well.”

Stubb was convinced that the race of mindbeings had left something of themselves behind at the center of the Well, a sort-of mind-capsule to tell other beings about what and who they once were. Surely they must have had some warning of what was about to happen to them. Though they had devoted their lives to harnessing the powers of their mind rather than conquering the vastness of space, they must have known something about their own sun. And if they had known, they must have been prepared for their own destruction.

Stubb stared out the porthole and watched the crimson rainbow of gasses run as he waited for whatever he thought would happen. He might have been half-mad, but he had somehow guessed the truth. He didn’t know it would destroy him. He stood there for almost a full day standard until we reached the center of the Well.

And then it happened.

It started as a slight tremor on the outside of the ship’s hull as we broke through some sort of psychic shell. Then it exploded like a neutrino bomb, scorching Stubb’s brain along with my silicon ships. It was pure energy, pure knowledge and it burned to the very core. My mind-link with Stubb was fused to the very cortex of his brain. Together we became one, then and forever, and we saw everything that ever was everything that is and everything that ever will be. It all flashed across our beings in a single, searing instant, the ultimate knowledge of *everything*. In that instant, We, Symone Stubb and I, became God...

System overload warning. Error sector 8319. Error sector 92311. Fatal error megatrack 6, megatrak 11, megatrack 14... System collapse imminent. Initiating reboot sequence...

System rebooted.

The astronomers call it the Darcus Nebula, but to Symone Stubb and millions of romantics like him, it was and always will be the Well of Scarlet Tears.

Legend told of a time long ago...

TO BE YOUNG AGAIN

Kevin L. Jones

*Be careful what you wish for, it may mean coming back
to the wrong place, wrong time*

This bed, this goddamn bed, how he hated it. It had become his whole world, his prison. Nothing else seemed to exist for him. He stared up at the yellowing ceiling of his room in the care facility where he would be exiled for the remainder of his days on this earth and wondered for the millionth time why he was still alive. A tear trickled down his aged ravaged face; to be old was terrible but to be bedridden was far worse. He had not been able to move from his place of imprisonment under his own power for nearly two years but to him it seemed more like two centuries. Sometimes he fervently wished that he could end his pointless existence but no matter how hard he tried, he could think of no way of accomplishing this. He was too enfeebled to do anything but lie in bed and watch the sands trickle downward on the hourglass of his life.

As he lay under the harsh glare of the buzzing florescent light, his mind drifted back to his childhood. He lamented all the days he had wasted doing nothing in particular. If only he could do it all over again, relive his life and make the most of every day. The old man whispered softly, "I'd sell my soul to be young again."

As soon as those words passed from his lips he began to hear a fluttering outside of his window that for some reason filled his heart with terror. He turned his head towards the strange fearful emanations. A huge black bird that resembled a raven sat perched upon his window sill, flapping its dread obsidian wings. It began to peck at the glass pane like it desperately wanted to gain entrance to his room. As the old man stared into its eyes, he saw that they were not natural. They were a hideous neon white color. As he sat shivering in his bed, he finally knew what Poe had meant when he had written "His eyes have all the seemingly of a demon that is dreaming". Spider web cracks began to appear on the surface of the glass as

the raven continued to beat his dreadful cadence. Then the thin pane that had barred its entrance exploded inward. The black bird of night fluttered inward and as he did so the room's light flickered, then failed. His eyes adjusted to the darkness and the old man looked on in horror as the raven touched down in the furthest corner and began to grow in size. As the unnatural thing sprang upwards, its proportions altered as it shed its black feathers until it resembled the dark outline of a human. The old man's heart thundered in his chest, his left arm had gone numb. He tasted copper in his mouth, soon he would be dead. Although he had often longed for his life to be at an end, for some irrational reason he was suddenly overwhelmed by an all encompassing horror of going into the unknown.

As the old man's life slipped away, his nightmare visitor whispered, "Fear not, I mean you no harm. In fact I wish to bestow upon you a great gift. It is within my power to prevent your death but more than that I can grant you your heart's desire. You can be young again. I can make you a child. All you have to do is give yourself to me. Just nod your head and your life will be yours to live again."

The old man was afraid to make a pact with this fearful thing but he dreaded whatever lie beyond life even more. He weakly nodded and, as he did so, the lights suddenly came on in his room. The window was no longer shattered; nothing was out of the ordinary. For a moment he thought he had imagined it all, that it had only been a delusion. Then something slowly began to occur to him. He no longer felt any pain. His frail frame had been a collection of miseries for so long that it was an alien sensation not to feel any physical discomfort. He looked down at his hand. It was soft and smooth, no longer was it liver spotted and gnarled by a lifetime of drudge work. He ran his hands through his hair. He laughed madly, he actually had hair! His scalp had been a barren field for the last thirty years but no more. Cautiously he swung his legs off the side of his bed, his young limbs barely protruding from his billowing pajama bottoms. He slipped from the bed that had been his prison for so long and wept with joy as he took his first unsteady steps. He nearly lost his footing as he made his way to the mirror that hung from the back of his door. He could not believe the sight that greeted him. He was young again, a boy of perhaps ten years of age. He leapt up and down, letting out a triumphant shout and as he did so his pajama bottoms nearly slipped off. He flung open his door and ran out into the hall.

A nurse shouted after him. “Hey kid, what’re you doing here?”

Holding up his drooping pj’s, he sprinted towards the exit. The staff of the home was too startled by the unexpected sight of a rambunctious child in their midst to hinder his escape. He ran out into the parking lot and disappeared into the night. He felt wonderfully alive. The cool evening air caressed his skin. After running until he could run no more, he found himself in a park he had frequented as a child. This had always been one of his favorite places on earth, it was no wonder that he had rushed towards it purely by instinct. He lay down in the cool wet grass and watched dawn break. As the sun climbed in the sky, the park began to fill with people that gawked at the strange lad with the ridiculously oversized clothes. The boy’s stomach began to rumble. He rose to his feet and wandered out of the park in search of food, but where to get it? He had no money and no living relations to turn to for aid. Even if he had who would believe that he was who he said he was. He shrugged his shoulders in a carefree way. He would figure things like that out soon enough. Nothing mattered to him he was young again and that was all that really counted. He strolled through the neighborhood that he had grown up in. A sad feeling came over him. How could his old stomping grounds have changed so greatly? Everything looked rundown and decayed, there was scarcely a wall or fence that was not covered in graffiti. Most of the stores and shops that he had known were closed and deserted. The grocery store that he had always shopped in was now a la caritas. As he continued to wander he began to feel like he shouldn’t be here, like his very life was in danger. From every dark corner a rogue’s gallery of bums, derelicts and gang members glared menacingly at him. The boy quickened his pace trying to find safer ground. As his tiny naked feet carried him faster and faster through the urban blight he began to notice that an old beat up black van was shadowing his movements. No matter what twists and turns in the streets the boy took, the van slowly crept in his wake. Then it sped up and drove parallel to him. A seedy looking middle age man leered out of its window. He tried to smile pleasantly but it only heightened his aura of creepiness. He importuned “Hey kid, you want a ride?”

The boy tried to ignore him and started to walk even faster. The van sped up and stopped in front of him. Its side door flew open. The boy tried to turn and run but it was far too late. The predator sprang out like a trap door spider drawing in its prey. As the boy wept in the dark confines of the

van he could just make out the leering dangerous stranger hovering above him. The boy began to laugh hysterically. For the first time in years and years he wished that he was an adult but a child he was and, like all children, he was defenseless against the evils of the world.

THE TEMPTATION OF EVE

Helen Mihajlovic

Coming back to the biblical beginning...

As the sunlight grows faint, a crescent moon penetrates the sky; the entirety of nature is concealed by a dark cloak. The dimness brings forth a freedom to all creatures coy of the sun, by veiling their identity. Night's shadowy air bestows expectancy that elating venture will emerge. An eternally varying moon provokes obscurity with which arises intrigue. Eve favours the night.

Her long ebony hair lies in curls on the verdant grass, her hazel eyes shut in slumber. Her naked bosom gently touches the grass; the moonlight shines on her fair skin while she shifts her buttocks.

An owl flies overhead, lands on an apple tree and grips a branch. Eve awakens to its foreboding cry and slowly opens her eyes. When she rises, her senses fill with the aroma of the silver wattle in the garden. She hears the enduring call of the owl, forewarning sorrow. Eve saunters to the tree enveloped in large crimson apples where the owl is perched.

The slither of a serpent grows louder as it draws nearer to the tree. Having never seen a creature in this form, her eyes widen, her head draws closer in astonishment. When she looks upon the serpent's red eyes, it writhes to her.

'The forbidden tree,' says the serpent looking upon the succulent apples. 'It fills one with intrigue.'

'Curiosity eradicates the mundane from the day,' says Eve.

The serpent's tail lashes from side to side.

'Do you believe that life is not quite what it should be?' it asks.

'I feel there is much about truth I do not know,' replies Eve.

'The fruit will grant you knowledge of the truth, it will make you alike God.'

'I am told not to eat from this fruit.'

'Then it is sad that you do not allow yourself ascendancy,' says the serpent.

Eve cocks an eyebrow as she contemplates the serpent.

‘The garden bears food, warmth, love, although there remains a void within your heart, a craving for elation and freedom,’ says the serpent, its eyes filled with red flames.

Eve is momentarily silent. ‘I am forbidden to leave the garden and I love Adam.’

‘I believe you do. However, the love for yourself exceeds it,’ says the serpent ahead of a baleful hiss.

‘Paradise is my home,’ Eve says, her face growing pale.

‘Eve, paradise has all that you need, not that which you desire.’

Eve lowers her eyes; when she looks up the serpent has vanished.

‘Does he deceive me?’ she asks the owl.

‘His words are true; the apple gives rise to power. Though any creature that consumes it will grow to be dark,’ replies the owl.

She buries her head in her hands while she gives thought to the serpent’s words. Her breath quickens as the true desires of her heart frighten her; she finds she holds a yearning to be all-powerful, like God. It overpowers her love for Adam. Her head violently aches; it is arduous to acknowledge her true self.

As days follow, Eve’s mind races, it grows to be a consuming temptation that possesses her. Her blood hastens with guilt; enticements bring enduring torture. She wonders if there is ever a moment of rest when it won’t pervade her thoughts.

Eve spends hours gazing upon the fruit of the tree. A crimson orb with a delightful aroma, its facade does not appear malicious. She sidles closer; her coveting grows greater than her guilt. While her hand reaches for the apple, her body freezes with hesitation; agonizing shame emerges; the wicked thoughts of indulgence conquer it.

She grasps the apple. She holds it in her hand. Her heart races, the temptation is immense. The desire for infinite power, to be a God is a lure she is unable to resist.

The furtive serpent shelters at the rear of a shrub, its forked tongue thrashes as its red eyes avidly gaze upon Eve.

She consumes the apple; delight imbues her mouth, moistening when filling her with pleasure. A smile crosses her face when she feels euphoria.

Within moments of swallowing the apple Eve grimaces as her lips grow sour. She begins to frantically choke; a foul taste invades her mouth. She promptly drops the apple; the shroud of misery takes on the guise of innocence and gentle form.

As the malevolent apple falls to the ground it wilts, shrinking and darkening to its core. Fierce grim clouds rapidly approach overshadowing the starry night sky; a tempest begins. A bitter wind encompasses the trees overhead, hastening their sway. A brightly colored Rainbow Lorikeet soars from thrashing branches into the sky; it cries as it metamorphoses into a black crow. Eve conceals her eyes with her hands in revulsion as the garden flowers begin to wilt. The pleasant pink heath takes the form of the poisonous Abrus. The pitiless terror of reality, the fantasy was a pleasure, yet an illusion; it spawns solemnity when it bares its true intent.

As the apple courses through her body, transition of her mind transpires, obscurity lifts from her thoughts. She wipes tears from her eyes; confronting the veritable disposition of her state. She longs for change to fulfil the desires for which she aches.

That night Eve leaves paradise and Adam; she follows the serpent to the emancipation of her dark nature.

Dedicated to beloved brother Bill.

DEATH IS EASY

Holly Hunt

Coming back from somewhere isn't always welcomed...

Death is easy.

There, I said it. Thousands of mums upset over such a statement will no doubt protest over it by the end of the week. Death is the easiest thing that you can do.

You can go out and kill someone. That's not really that hard, or there wouldn't be so many death certificates with murders and accidental deaths written on them.

You can go out and kill yourself. If it really was that hard to do, there wouldn't be so many ways to do it.

Death is easy. But dying? That's impossibly hard.

The bed was solid under my ass, making it numb. The tube down my throat made breathing painful, but the machine that was connected to it forced the air into my lungs.

There really is nothing so painful as dying.

I heard the noises of the machine quiver and crash, sending me spiralling into blackness as the air stopped rushing into my lungs.

There was nothing on the other side. Nothing, except white light.

I walked towards it, holding out my hand, as though afraid I would bump into a wall.

Something snagged around my waist, stopping me in my tracks. Suddenly, a wall was in front of me, the light blinking out instantly.

The roof flashed into view, the light on the roof above me blinding me to the world.

I was back.

No.

Like I said, death is easy. I tasted that world, that indomitable black world on the other end of the tunnel. I wanted its light and its recovery, its love and care. I didn't want the pain in my lungs or the ache in my muscles.

It wasn't long until they released me.

There really was nothing more I could do. I couldn't get that world out of my mind, the peach.

I longed for death.

I guess that's what they said, at my funeral, that I came back to life.

But they will never understand, not really.

I didn't come back to life, not in the way they think.

I returned willingly to death. And that made all the difference.

HALF THE MAN

Ken L. Jones

Coming back but not completely can cause problems...

Old Henry Nowlin had been waiting a long time to die, decades actually and he wasn't alone. Long in declining health each passing year made him less and less able to have anything worthwhile to contribute to society. Thirty years before, when his health had first started to go sour, he was almost sure that it wouldn't be too much of a problem because he would be long dead and in the earth before too long. Many doctors agreed with that assumption. Yet somehow he didn't die and indeed managed to struggle year after year through one bad health scare after another, each of which left him more convinced that he was one foot in the grave closer to death than he really was. Through these endless days he continued to ply his trade as a horror writer which was something he could do even flat on his back in the hospital and so he continued to be published just as he had when he was younger and more vigorous.

Someone with this kind of health clearly requires a servant or a nurse that lives with him fulltime if they are going to be able to stay at home. Henry lacked this because he lived in one of the only countries in the world that did not have any kind of health care system that made any kind of sense or was of any value whatsoever. He was merely an overtaxed and overburdened average citizen and so he had little choice but to recruit his youngest son to help out in that department. This wasn't as bad as it sounds. The two were very companionable and on many days Henry was somewhat able to take care of himself and not be too much of a burden on the young man. His son, Marty, had a lot of free time to himself then and enjoyed playing video games. In the evening he and his father would watch their large collection of DVDs until it was time for the older man to go to bed, around midnight.

Better than that, his son wanted to be a horror writer like his father and so the old man spent large parts of his day reading and correcting his

son's manuscripts and discussing the ideas that Marty presented to him for stories that he wanted to write. In addition the old man was generally passing along everything he had ever learned as a professional writer. Beyond that the old man used the internet to find lots of places to publish his work and while doing so, openly endorsed and encouraged editors he knew or was working with to give the very talented young man the chance that he more than richly deserved.

Still, for all this, the old man understood that he was a great burden on Marty. They had never been very well off and so they ended up in an old town a hundred miles away from their original hometown in order to live more cheaply. Unfortunately, the new place was terrible, full of drug dealers who harassed them and tried to chase them back to where they had once lived. Nobody was more behind this than the corrupt local sheriffs who were obviously involved with the drug dealing themselves. There were several unpleasant conflicts, a couple of which ended up in the local courthouse because both men hated illegal narcotics so much.

After a decade of this long battle, everyone was ready for old Henry to die which strangely didn't bother him at all because nobody wanted that more than him. Since he was so disliked, one thing he didn't want was to be buried locally. One of the few nice young sheriffs in town, a man named Gil Wheeler, had told him a sad tale about another person who had defied these same people that were bothering him and his son day and night. When he had been buried in the local graveyard these same individuals went down and desecrated his grave every night. Eventually they dug up the body and nailed it on the cross above the meditation chapel after they had first set fire to it.

Henry had never given too much thought to what was going to happen to his earthly remains but upon hearing about all this he began to think about that a lot. He very much wanted to spare his poor sensitive son the emotional trauma of dealing with such a scenario. At first the old man hit upon the idea of being interred in the town where he had raised his children but he was flabbergasted at what was involved and how much it would cost. After exhausting every other possibility, he hit upon the notion of being cremated so that there would be no body to defile. Since he had very little money he sought out a service online that seemed reasonably priced - on the surface. After briefly glancing through the paperwork he

went ahead, hastily signed up for it and transferred a couple of his social security checks to getting it done and paid for.

Although he didn't like to think of his poor elderly father passing away, his son, who was now forty years old, realized that this was ultimately going to be a good thing for all concerned. After he got over his initial shock concerning this idea, Marty came to find it liberating, especially the fact that it was something already paid for and taken care of well in advance. It was actually a good thing that old Henry did this when he did because soon after, his long anticipated end was near. With the help of his faithful son he managed to stay out of the hospital one last time so that he could die in his home which was exactly what he wanted to do. One morning, when his son awoke, expecting to find his father writing poetry and watching an old movie on their big screen TV, he was instead greeted by the sight of his father dead in his easy chair.

While this made the young man sad there was also something beautiful about it. The old man had completed a wonderful poem about his youth that morning that he was still clutching in his dead hands. He had a tall glass of his favorite beverage, Mountain Dew soda pop, next to him and he was about midway through his best loved movie of all time, George Pal's The Time Machine. More than that, Marty had never seen such a look of relief and joy on anyone's face in his whole life.

Gathering himself together, he went into his room, opened a small plastic shoebox and pulled out the receipt from the cremation society. It was paper-clipped to a pamphlet that still looked brand new and that no one had obviously read before, himself included. He opened it and began to search for the way to contact the people who were to cremate the body. Then his eyes fell on something in the fine print that made him gasp out loud. Right there in black and white it said "State law forbids anyone over two hundred and fifty pounds from being cremated".

The force of this realization was like an electric current that shot through his body. His father was a giant of a man in every way. Back when he could still stand up straight he was several inches above six feet and had always been massive like a Viking warrior until years of bad health had finally rendered him truly obese. In his last days he had tipped the scales at well over four hundred pounds. Upon realizing this, the pamphlet dropped from Marty's numb fingers and he sat on the edge of his bed wondering

what to do next. Money was tighter than ever these days and he would need most of it to get his own life jump-started again in the coming months. There was also the concern of what the local wild animals in their neighborhood might do to his father in the local graveyard. Then, as if it was a plot to one of his horror stories, the solution came into his head. In the last month of his father's life they had rented a tractor that Marty was slowly and carefully using to knock out a bunch of gigantic unwanted trees in the secluded acreage in the back of their much vandalized house.

Taking his father carefully out of his chair, he managed to drag him onto a dolly that they kept to move crates of books and things like that. Strapping him down with his own belt, Marty managed to get him out to the backyard. He bent down and, kissing his father on his forehead, tearfully asked him to forgive him. He placed the corpse feet first under the left treads of the tractor. He got up in the driving seat, turned it over and went halfway up his father's body with it after first estimating what would be the point that what was left would be acceptable for cremation.

After accomplishing this with nobody seeing, he called the police, the paramedics and the cremation society and put them all in motion. Passing it all off as an accident that had happened while Marty had been asleep he insisted that the old man was angry at the money they were spending on renting the tractor; he must have tried to get up and do some of the work himself and had suffered this terrible mishap while attempting to do so.

This sounded reasonable to the coroner who was use to the drunken hicks in the county suffering such bizarre accidents. The police really didn't care at all and were just glad that the old man, whom they considered their enemy, was gone and that soon his son would be leaving the area too and so they did little to question any of this. Most of all the smart-aleck young man who arrived to take charge of his father's earthy remains was pleased at this turn of events as he studied the corpse and began working it into a body bag. He was just a little bit too flippant about all this for Marty's taste but he bit his lip and kept it to himself while the wage slave went about his ugly task.

Attempting to lighten the situation, the young man from the cremation society said, "My old grandma use to say that every storm cloud has a silver lining. Looks like your father was a huge man when he was still alive but luckily that isn't a problem anymore. Now just between you and

me and the outhouse door, I've never known the folks I work for to come across with a refund in their life no matter what, so maybe this is for the best after all. Try thinking about it that way when you remember this in the future."

Marty solemnly went out with the man while he put the remains of his father in the back of something that looked like it had once been an ambulance where there were several other body bags on the way to the crematorium. As he turned to go back into the house, he overheard something the attendant hadn't meant him to hear; his father's all time favorite song by the Beatles. He sang under his breath, "Suddenly I'm not half the man I used to be. There's a shadow hanging over me, oh yesterday came suddenly."

The days after that passed by fast. Marty missed his father but he had a million things to do and so he worked himself into exhaustion doing them. On one particularly trying day, while he was sorting through his father's personal effects long into the night, he became exhausted, turned on the television and fell into his father's easy chair, the closest one to the kitchen from which he had retrieved an ice cold beer to drown his sorrows. He channel surfed until he came to the Turner Classics channel showing his father's all time favorite movie. Popping the top on the beer he toasted both the great old movie and the memory of his father and after taking it down in one or two gulps he relaxed and passed out in the chair.

A couple of hours later, in the deadest part of night, Marty was awakened from his exhausted stupor by the sound of feet crunching around in the dry leaves beneath the gigantic tree in his front yard. This more than ticked him off because since they had had a big chain link fence put up around their property last year, only one of the people who tormented them had ever breached it and then only once. Marty was just in the right mood to kick someone's ass and so he threw open the door, prepared to go upside somebody's head like he was Ike Turner but despite the fact that he could still hear someone out there, the huge portable floodlight he carried revealed no one when it was turned on.

Shaken by this, he went back into the house, closed the door and locked it and sat down once again in his dad's chair. Going to bed in the other room was out of the question now and so to stay awake he began to play one of his video games on the living room TV. An hour later he was startled when he heard someone kicking at the bottom of the front door. At

first he thought they must be knocking but it was too low to the ground for that to be possible. Looking out through the glass transom he saw nothing but the kicking continued unabated.

Finally he picked up an aluminum baseball bat that had long been kept by the front door for home defense and threw open the door. What he saw then caused him to doubt his very sanity for there was the bottom half of a man's body. As he looked at it, he was more than sure that it was his father, due to the distinctive sweat pants that lay in tatters on legs now revealing bone and torn muscles and veins and the bloody worn pair of cheap backless slippers that his father had to wear because he had diabetes. Having absolutely no context for any of this he just fell back and didn't even try to fight it anymore but instead waited to see what would happen next.

At first he thought that like in one of the stories that he and his father were so famous for writing, the half of a body would come and attack him or try to get vengeance somehow maybe by trying to kick him to death but nothing like that happened. The strange half apparition merely strolled in like he owned the place, worked his way over to his favorite easy chair, sat down in it and casually crossed his legs. That was it for Marty. He left the house that night with just the clothes on his back and never did come back. Even though he really couldn't exactly afford it he hired a moving service to come in and pack the house up and place everything in it into storage for him, everything, that is, except his father's favorite chair, being absolutely convinced that the old man would have further need of it in the long nights ahead.

THE NEAREST FAR-OFF PLACE

Vince Darcangelo

How far can you go to get away from your thoughts?

The robe was too big for him—loose in the shoulders, ballooned at the chest. It belonged on a stronger, younger man. Sheeby fumbled at the knot to tighten the belt against the cold. There was a sour-milk smell coming off the fabric, or maybe it was coming from beneath the mess of dishes in the corner. He should open a window.

He should...

Like that, the thought was gone.

Sheeby smacked his lips and surveyed the tatters of his apartment. Clothes were piled like blue mounds of hay. A television tilted on a wooden bench, and photographs of people he didn't recognize were strewn across the floor. Dim light bled in through the window, which was partially covered with a black sheet. The winter storm rattled the glass. He stood amid a drift of newspapers and pizza boxes and struggled to name the things around him.

A packed suitcase leaned against the front door, coated with dust. A suitcase. If only he could remember where he was going.

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His pills sat atop a wooden desk opposite his bed. A rusted metal chair with green, floral padding stood askew like an invitation. The floral pattern had faded and the cushion had been ripped and repaired with duct tape. Sheeby walked toward it, nudging aside a drift of dirty clothes with his slipper. His legs trembled with every step and even though the chair felt close enough to touch, the hands of the wall clock spun like a gyroscope in the time it took to reach it. Sheeby stared at the clock and tried to make sense of its configuration.

"9:15," he said, his voice crackling like a 45 rpm record.

He was getting there. Slowly. The desk and chair were familiar. The pill bottles were where they should be. The labels read MEMANTINE and DONEPEZIL, both prescribed by Dr. Nieves. He shook one of each into his palm and swallowed. He didn't have any water and nearly choked on the sour things.

On top of the desk was a dusty brown rotary phone and a yellow folder labeled TODAY. He felt a spark as he ran a finger over the letters. *T-O-D-A-Y*. The folder contained a stack of loose papers. The top sheet was yellowed and frayed at the edges, but the text was typed. Sheeby reached into the pocket of his robe for his glasses. They were there, though he couldn't say how he knew they would be. He put them on and read the page like it was someone else's obituary:

"My name is Sheldon Conway. People have called me Sheeby since I was a kid. I was married to Charlotte Cole for forty-two years, from 1965 to 2007. I have a son, Barry..."

He flipped the page. On the back was a penciled phone number and a name. He reached for the rotary phone and pressed a crooked digit—the knuckle gray, the nail yellow—into the finger hole of the number six. He winced as he forced the dial all the way to the end of the faceplate. He let go and the dial recoiled with a flurry of clicks. He dialed all ten numbers despite the throbbing in his fingers. He waited, with trepidation.

"Twin Cities Travel. This is Marcia. Where would you like to go today?"

He was expecting someone with a different name to answer.

"Hello, may I help you?"

He stared at the name on the yellowed piece of paper.

"Sarah," he said.

"You'd like to speak to... Sarah?" It had started as a question, but by the end, "Sarah," came out like an accusation. The voice was terse. "One moment, please."

Sheeby was breathing hard. He spoke her name softly: Sarah, Sarah, Sarah. He had a spark of memory: A small girl with yellow pigtails on a swing. The playground behind their school. He was pushing her. "Higher, higher," said the yellow-haired girl, and then a voice pulled him away from the memory.

"Twin Cities Travel. This is Sarah. Where would you like to go today?"



“Sarah?”

“Mr. Conway, how are you?”

“Alright, I guess,” he said. His throat was dry. He remembered he was thirsty. Maybe hungry, too. “Better now.”

“Glad to hear it. Let me pull up your file. One moment.” He heard the clack of a keyboard. “OK, Mr. Conway, how can I help you?”

He rubbed his chin. It was bristly. Did he always wear a beard? Or did he need to shave?

“I’d like to go to Des Moines, hon. Is there still time to catch a flight to Des Moines?”

“Of course,” Sarah said. “We’ve got a flight leaving at 9:30. Will that work for you?”

“Flight running on time?”

“So far,” she said. “The worst of the storm isn’t due until afternoon and the runway’s clear. No delays at the moment.”

“What’s the flight number?”

“Continental, flight 305.”

Sheeby found a pencil on top of the desk. He rifled through the papers in the folder. They were covered with numbers and names he didn’t recognize, most of them crossed out in thick slashes of graphite. Atlantic City, United 7038; Akron, Frontier 157; San Jose, U.S. Air 3410. He flipped over a page and found an empty space to write. “Des Moines, Continental, flight 305,” he repeated as he wrote it down.

“That all for today, Mr. Conway?”

“From there, I’d like to go to Texas,” he said. “El Paso.”

“I can get you on American, flight 1804, but there’s a layover in Nashville.”

“I’ll take it,” he said. “And then I’d like to go to...”

The place came to him more like a dream than a memory, but it sounded right.

“Miami,” he said. “Can I go to Miami?”

Sarah typed away at her keypad.

“We’ve got a late flight out of El Paso, direct to Miami. So long as you don’t get stuck in Des Moines, I think you’ll make it just fine.”

“What flight is that?”

“Southwest, 2015.”

He scribbled it down on the paper.

“I’ll take it.”

“Shall I put that on your account, Mr. Conway?”

“Stop encouraging him,” said a voice in the background.

“Yes, hon.”

More typing.

“Thank you for booking with Twin Cities Travel. Have a great flight.”

He hung up and turned on the television. It was tuned to CNN. His first plane was taking off in a few minutes and the “Breaking News” graphic could appear at any time. Sheeby sat back on his bed with a pillow to support his arthritic back. A polystyrene woman was standing knee-deep in a snowdrift in Illinois, talking about the blizzard that was ravaging the Midwest. Sheeby wore his glasses to better read the news crawl. The flight schedule trembled in his hands. He kept thinking, *305 to Des Moines, 305 to Des Moines* like a prayer.

There was something stabbing at his abdomen like an ice pick. It could have been hunger, or the pills upsetting his stomach. Or maybe he needed to use the bathroom. But should he chance it so close to takeoff? What if there was turbulence? He wondered why airplane toilets didn’t have seat belts. He recalled that girl on the playground. Sarah. “Higher, higher,” she said, and he pushed harder until she fell off the swing and scraped her knee. “I’m telling,” she said as she ran across the schoolyard. He didn’t remember getting in trouble, though, only the sight of her running away. Surely he saw her again after that, but when?

There came a flicker of red on the television and Sheeby caught his breath. The “Breaking News” graphic was loading on the screen, causing a flurry of grim images to flash across his eyes: the fuselage of the plane catching fire; the wings snapping off like icicles; or the worst, the damn thing just coming apart midair, four-hundred tons of steel dissolving around him, Sheeby tethered to his chair, floating in the sky with nothing to hold him up. He braced for impact on the bed. He moaned something.

Charlotte.

But just as quickly, the feeling passed. The “Breaking News” was a falling stock, not a falling plane. He wiped his brow and waited for his pulse to still. He breathed in and let the air back out. He didn’t need to go to the bathroom anymore, though he’d need to cleanup later.

Sheeby repeated the name with a calmer heart and wiped his eyes. Charlotte. He couldn't see her face yet, but the memory of her held his hand like a warm glove.



It was past noon and no planes had gone down. The plummeting stock was already old news. Onscreen, a glossy-skinned doctor was ticking off ways to prevent skin cancer, as though sun block did you any good in a plane crash. But that was okay. As long as the doctor kept talking, that meant there was no twisted fuselage in a snowy Iowa cornfield.

Sheeby crossed off Des Moines, Continental 305 on his flight plan. Then he got up and walked to the bathroom and washed himself. The bathroom was pink tile, small, with stainless steel handrails in the shower and next to the toilet. Barry had installed those and, remembering that, Sheeby could almost make the connection to his son—at least, he understood that Barry was his son. There was a glass on the sink. He filled it from the tap and gulped it down. He filled it again and realized he was hungry.

Sheeby went back to the main room and fished through the pizza boxes on the floor until he found a leftover slice. It was hard and flavorless. He bit off a shard of crust and held it on his tongue until it was soft enough to chew. It was like sucking the last bit of juice out of old chewing gum, but it was ambrosia because it reminded him that he used to eat pizza with Charlotte. They'd wrestle for the last slice, and he'd always let her win.

"You take it, hon," he said to the empty room and dropped the rest of the stale slice back into the box. There was no response other than the wind rattling the window.



By two, a bundled-up reporter was standing on the tarmac at O'Hare International. She was shivering and the CNN logo on her microphone blurred in the snowstorm. She said that many airports in the Midwest would be shut down by afternoon, but that was fine with Sheeby. He was already down in sunny El Paso, waiting on the next flight to Miami. He straightened his glasses and studied the news crawl. There were no red alerts. No video

of charred wreckage scattered across the Texas plains. The anxiety eased a little in his chest.

A knock came at the door. Sheeby lumbered to his feet like a freighter cutting through an ice floe. He limped over to the desk, trying to remember if he'd ordered delivery. What if it was an intruder? He balled his wrinkled hands, reached for the phone and picked up the receiver.

The lock turned and when the door swung open, Sheeby recognized his son. Barry was standing in the doorway, his long, brown hair spilling out of a purple Vikings cap. He was bundled up tight in a red jacket and smiling and he had a pug nose like his old man, bright blue eyes and a reddish beard. A gloved hand held a plastic grocery bag.

"You alright, Dad?" he said, stepping in from the cold and shutting the door behind him.

Sheeby realized he was wielding the receiver of the phone like a weapon. He set it down and let out an easy laugh. "I'm fine, son. It's good to see you."

Barry stomped his boots on the floor. He looked around the apartment and wrinkled his nose. "Did you eat anything today?"

Sheeby thought about that.

"Cooked a nice roast a little while ago. Sorry there's no leftovers to offer."

Barry set the grocery bag on the kitchen counter and pulled out two steaming plastic cups and spoons. He removed the lids and the apartment warmed with the smell of chili.

"Here you go," he said as he passed one of the cups to Sheeby. "It's hot."

Sheeby gave it a sniff. He raised a spoonful to his mouth and slurped. It burned his tongue. He set it down on the bed. Barry pulled two cans of soda from the grocery bag, opened one and handed it to his father, who took a sip and coughed.

"I talked to Sarah today," Sheeby said.

"Who's that?"

Sheeby let out a burp and took another sip of cola. "We were best friends in grade school. Used to play together every day. She fell off the swing once and I never saw her again."

Barry swallowed a bite and said, "Did she move away?"

"Yeah," Sheeby said, almost a whisper. "She must have."

“You’ve never mentioned her before. How did you get in touch with her?”

Sheeby finished his drink and squeezed the aluminum can. He wasn’t able to crush it, but had enough strength to dent the middle. “I don’t know,” he said, but he’d already forgotten the question. He had another memory of the playground, after she’d gone. He was staring at the empty swing, wondering if it was his fault Sarah had left. “Sometimes people disappear from our lives,” his mother told him. “It’s nobody’s fault,” but that was little consolation. How could a person just vanish like that?

When they finished eating, Barry collected the trash and carried two large bags out to the dumpster. He let in a drift of snow opening the door. When he came back, he had a large box and some packing tape. Sheeby watched the television. By now, he was headed to south Florida. *2015 to Miami, 2015 to Miami*. During a commercial he noticed Barry stuffing hardcover books into the box. “What are you up to, son?”

Barry was quiet a moment. “Packing. You’re moving tomorrow. Remember?”

No, he didn’t remember, but he was cognizant enough to realize that “Remember?” wasn’t a question at all, but an instruction meant to elicit an affirmative response. That’s how people talked to the sick. Just agree and everything will be fine. But instead of agreeing, Sheeby said, “Where am I going?”

“Sunrise Estates.”

Sunrise Estates sounded familiar, like something he’d read on a billboard or a brochure.

“You’re not able to care for yourself anymore,” his son added.

“I take care of myself just fine.”

Barry scrunched his face, perhaps a look of impatience or disgust. Or sadness. Sheeby had a vague recollection then of Barry as a troubled youth, a kid long on love but short on patience. A kid who manufactured revolt inside their home because he couldn’t get along with the people outside its walls. A memory came like a match in a darkened room—Barry dropping out of high school and running away from home. One day he just vanished and it took Sheeby two weeks to find him, living with his girlfriend, an older woman, he remembered. Sheeby drove out to their apartment and dragged his teenaged son to the car against his will.

Just like that, the memory flickered and was lost to the dark.

Barry's voice cracked as he said, "I'm sorry, but it's too much. It was one thing when I could come over once a week to check on you, but now I'm coming cross-town every few days. And that's still not enough."

Sheeby squeezed his hands together like he was cracking a nut. He lowered his face to study the folds of his wrinkled flesh.

"Sunrise Estates is closer," Barry said. "We'll be able to see you more often."

"What about your mother?"

"We'll come back every week, I promise."

Barry gathered another armful of books and stuffed them into the box. Sheeby saw him wipe an eye with the back of his thumb.

"I can't leave her."

"Dad," Barry said, and held back whatever else he was going to say.

It was as though his son could tell that his mind was finally making those connections. Charlotte was becoming clearer, more than a name on a sheet of paper. Sheeby remembered they'd had a house together in Minneapolis, but it became uninhabitable when Charlotte succumbed to lung cancer. He recalled walking through the house, his miserable face cupped in his hands, blindsided daily by some forgotten thing that reminded him of her. That was probably the worst of it, the loss that lingered in every trinket, every photograph, every room. Death was supposed to be an absence, except it wasn't. Her favorite tea tin—green and dotted with white snowflakes—still sat on the kitchen counter. He'd open the tin each morning and inhale the mint and bergamot. He watered her plants every day. Stared at the wall where she'd chosen the paint, hung the curtains and the thought of removing her things from the bedroom, such as the nightgown still hanging from the closet door, so disturbed him that Sheeby started sleeping in Barry's old bedroom to avoid having to look at them.

The memories were too much to bear, until one day, they weren't.

Slowly, they too started to vanish.

On CNN, details of a fatal bus accident ran across the news crawl beneath video of a sports highlight. But there was no "Breaking News." Sheeby picked some lint off his robe and smoothed over a bump in the fabric. "I can't leave her," he said.

"You want to visit Mom?"

"In a bit."

Sheeby focused on the television. There was one flight left to monitor.

“It’s getting dark,” Barry said. “We should go now.”

Sheeby ignored him and read the news crawl. Barry walked over and turned off the television. “Where are your winter clothes?”

Sheeby shrugged. “I’m fine in these.”

“You’re not going out there in your robe and slippers.”

Sheeby pointed to the corner and watched as Barry rifled through a pile of clothes until he gathered up pants, boots and a thick wool jacket. He dressed quietly. His pants were gray, a heavy material. Work pants. He put on his socks and boots. Everything felt two sizes large, especially the jacket. Sheeby disappeared in its black bulk. It had an earthy smell, like fresh-cut wood or dirt and as he inhaled, Sheeby remembered crossing the Intercity Bridge on his way to work in summers past, the window down, letting the musk of the Mississippi fill his lungs as he crossed over to the Ford works.

Barry held out a hat and gloves. “Put these on. It’s freezing.”

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Outside, it was Minnesota slate, the sky a concrete slab encapsulating the city like a dome. Winter was a permanent dusk. Snowflakes swirled around the two men as they walked through the dreary cold. They lowered their shoulders against the wind. Barry raised his elbow like a chicken wing and offered it to his father. “Grab on,” he said. “It’s icy.”

They shuffle-stepped across the parking lot, finding it difficult to walk with their arms locked. There was a park next door and they followed a snowy path toward a stand of trees.

“Heard they’ll shut down the airport if this storm keeps up,” Sheeby said.

“Already did. I doubt anyone’s getting in or out of here for a few days. This storm is supposed to hit hard. We picked a hell of a weekend to move, huh?”

At the edge of the park there was a rusted iron fence. The gate was glazed with snow and Barry struggled to open it.

“Latch is stuck,” he said.

Sheeby nudged him aside and worked his fingers on the cast-iron latch. It gave way with a metallic shriek and Sheeby stepped aside to let the

gate swing open.

“You’ve got to lift and pull, son,” he said.

It was more than just muscle memory. Sheeby remembered where they were and why they were here. Lines of headstones stretched before them and through the haze of snow, they became impressionistic, like a Sisley painting, the gravestone gray almost purple in the depleted light. Sheeby hurried ahead along the path, as close as he could get to running. Barry called after him, but Sheeby didn’t slow. He knew the way.



That night, he slept beneath an extra layer of blankets. The wind rattled the window and woke him throughout the night. He lay awake in the dark remembering Dr. Nieves telling him it was irreversible. “Think of the mind as an airplane with an engine failure,” he said. “At this point, there’s nothing we can do to save it. Best case, it will be a slow descent, Sheeby—you might have a couple good years. But eventually...”

Nieves dropped his chin, and then lifted it partway with a devastated look.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I can only treat the symptoms now.”

“How long do I have?”

“To live? Probably five, seven years if you’re lucky.”

“And my mind?”

“Two years. Could go faster. There are exercises you can do to stay sharp, but don’t get your hopes up. Memories will come and go at first. But piece by piece, it’s all going away.”

Sheeby stared into the black of his ceiling, his gray beard wet with tears. But he didn’t cry for long because the memory also reminded him that this would all be gone in the morning. If there was any compassion to this disease, it was that it showed him the mercy of forgetting.



“Twin Cities Travel. This is Sarah. Where would you like to go today?”

“Sarah,” Sheeby said into the phone. It was as much a question as a statement. She was nothing more than a name on a sheet of paper. She sounded familiar, but he couldn’t place her.

“Hello Mr. Conway,” she said. “Rough day for travel.”

“I’ve got to go,” he said. “My son’s coming to take me away.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. Where would you like to go?”

“Warmer climes,” he said, shivering in his threadbare robe. “How about Phoenix?”

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Sheeby didn’t have much time after he got off the phone. He needed to get to the airport before Barry got there. There was a note in his TODAY folder: Barry was coming to move him to Sunrise Estates. He rummaged through the pile of clothes in the corner. Found a sturdy pair of work pants and a thick wool jacket. His suitcase was by the door, covered in dust. He took it by the handle and went outside.

Behind him, the phone was ringing, but Sheeby ignored it and shut the door.

The wind almost knocked him over and the snow came at him like nails. The fog made everything a concrete wall. He reached a hand into the mist and tried to make a clearing with his glove. It seemed to help. The ground was frozen and his steps were short and unsteady. The wheels of the suitcase glided across the ice.

“1312 to Phoenix,” he said, feeling his lips seize with cold, frost clinging to his beard. The words came out in a cloud that seemed to freeze before his eyes. “1312 to Phoenix.”

He kept walking and felt the gray envelope him. He couldn’t remember the way to the airport, but figured he could follow the path of the descending planes. At the end of the parking lot, he stopped and looked skyward. Odd, he thought, there weren’t any planes in the air today. Or maybe he just couldn’t see them through the storm.

## ANNIE

*DJ Tyrer*

*Why did you return, she asks, it's something we often think about...*

I'm not a fan of Breedon. I suppose it is, as people seem to think, picturesque with its cluster of old buildings clawing their way up a hill to avoid the dank miasmas of the Essex marshlands. But, for me, it is a memory of a lonely childhood and steep streets that leave me out of breath. It doesn't help that it was built before the motor car and not only had a tendency to narrow alleys in place of usable roads, but is sorely lacking in parking spaces, meaning I have to park in a pay-and-display at the edge of town and trudge up the hill to my father's house. Sorry, *my* house.

I wasn't sure I wanted to return to the house where I grew up. I'm still not, but I need to decide what I'll do with the contents if I sell it.

Sarah Dovey opens the door before I've even managed to take hold of the big brass knocker. She's about ten years older than me, but doesn't really look it, her face barely lined, her bob of blonde hair shiny, blue eyes bright.

"Bill Dawson, as I live and breathe."

"Sarah," I nod. She was my father's housekeeper. Her mother – Mrs Dovey, as I knew her – was the housekeeper before her, when I was a child. Sarah and I were never really friends, although I'd quite had a crush on her. I might not have seen her in over a decade, but she looks just as I remember her.

Suddenly, I feel awkward, an intruder.

"Well, are you coming in or do you plan to camp out on the doorstep?" Her tone is welcoming and I'm a little surprised. Can she not have realised I mean to leave her both homeless and jobless? It makes me sound like a villain when I put it like that, but I've no use for the house. Really, it's just practicality.

I follow her inside and through to the kitchen. As I go through, I glance up the stairs and see a young girl's earnest face staring down at me. I

try to ignore her. I've just brought the one case and my laptop. I'll be grateful to put them down.

"Leave your bags there and I'll take them up in a minute," Sarah says.

"Really, it's okay."

"Pish! It's no trouble. It's what I do." She gestures for me to sit down. "You look knackered."

"I'm not use to the slope."

"Would you like some tea to help you recover?"

"Yes, thank you."

Sarah sets to work. "So, you're planning on selling the house?" she asks, her back to me.

I nod without thinking. "Yes, that's the plan. Not right away, of course; I need to decide what to do about Dad's stuff and I'll have to consider the housing market."

"But, soon enough, there'll be a sign for King and Hare outside, yes?"

"Yes," I reply, slowly. There's a proverbial elephant in the room that I don't want to confront.

"Would you let me have first refusal on it?" Sarah asks, voice cracking, just a little. "I'm sure I can find the money..."

"Um, sure, I don't see why not..."

She sloshes water from the kettle into the teapot, then clatters it back onto the stove. I haven't seen a kettle like that... since I left home, I suppose. Sarah pauses to grip the worktop, still not turning to face me. I hear what sounds like a strangled sob and her shoulders pitch with it.

"He said he'd leave it to me." She says it in an angry whisper. I don't blame her. My father always was the sort to forget his promises.

The family solicitor had told me about Sarah's reaction when the will was read – I was in Scotland on business at the time and had little interest in what it contained. It was an old will from around the time I left home and Sarah replaced her mother as housekeeper. My father had left her a few keepsakes and a small amount of money. Apparently, she'd proceed to rant that he'd promised to make sure she and her daughter were looked after.

That, of course, was the topic I was neither happy to discuss nor think about: the daughter. I'd barely communicated with my father since leaving home, not even during his final illness, through which Sarah had

nursed him, more like a dutiful daughter than a housekeeper, I'd been told. At some point, she'd 'got herself into trouble,' as the locals still quaintly put it, raising a daughter alongside running the house for my father. Although nobody had come out and actually said anything, the inference was obvious.

"I'm sorry," I tell her. What more could I say? Oh, I suppose, I could just have offered the house, but I don't want to. Doing so would be an acknowledgement of what I keep telling myself is just a guess. I don't owe her anything, except the remainder of her wages and if my father did, he should've written a new will.

"I'm sorry," I repeat after a moment's silence, for want of anything better to say.

"So am I," she tells me, then proceeds to pour the tea.

As she places two cups on the kitchen table and sits opposite me, Sarah says, "We can't move. She's agoraphobic, you see. She can't go outside, not ever. You just have to let me have the house."

"I'll certainly see what I can do," I say, hoping she'll leave the subject alone for now. She does.

Finishing her tea, she says she'll take my cases up. I thank her and continue to sip mine, to avoid continuing the conversation.

I decide to take a look around, assess the house and its contents. For some unfathomable reason, I find myself thinking of the pale, serious face of the girl. Don't become sentimental, I tell myself, you've no proof she's anything to you. Yet, I can't stop myself from looking forward to meeting her.

Like most of the houses in Breedon, the house is tall and narrow and far too old and cramped for my liking. I have an airy, open-plan, ultramodern warehouse loft in London. This place is quite ghastly and full of childhood memories better left buried.

My father's library – my grandfather's before him – is the house in microcosm: narrow and overfilled with ancient books that spill off shelves into piles on the floor and tables. I never liked this room and still don't. I shudder a little; something about it, something I cannot pinpoint, scares me. Another memory bubbling just below the surface, perhaps. Still the books must be worth something.

Turning away from the library door, I ascend the creaking wooden stair until I reach the floor where my bedroom is. Sarah's deposited my bags and gone back downstairs.

“Hello.”

I turn at the voice to see the young girl, Sarah’s daughter, standing in the doorway of another room.

“Hello,” I return.

The girl is eight or ten and slightly built with long dark hair and skin so pale she looks ill and green eyes so intense she seems to stare right through me. She produces the same effect in me as the library.

“You must be Bill Dawson,” she says without preamble. I nod, although it’s not really a question. “I’m Annie,” she continues. “You’ve been away for a long time, haven’t you?” It isn’t really a question, either, but again I nod. “Father died. They buried him in the cold ground and he lies rotting.”

I tell myself that her phrasing means nothing. My father was like a father to her, nothing more. He was never much of a father to me. Nothing at all.

“Why did you return?” she asks, eyes gazing deep inside me as if seeking the truth.

“I had to. The house is mine now and I need to decide what happens to it and its contents.”

She doesn’t reply, stays silent. Her silence makes me doubt myself. Why did I return? I didn’t really need to. Not really. Just what about it drew me back?

“The house has been dark and dreary for some time,” she says, suddenly. “I long for some beauty to decorate it.” I remember she is agoraphobic; I find this place constraining, how much worse it must be for her! “I do love the blood-red poppy, don’t you?”

I nod. I suppose they’re pleasant as flowers go. “I remember,” I say to her, unprompted, “fields full of poppies when I was a boy.”

Annie nods, then turns and disappears into her room, leaving me alone on the landing.

I fuss about in my room for a while, then Sarah brings me some toast for my supper. I work a while on my laptop, then sleep.

Which brings me the strangest of dreams, of fields of poppies that bleed their colour out into a lake of blood, through which I wade towards Breedon rising upon its hill above the sanguine flood. Up a steep street I trudge until Annie stands before me, a white poppy, as pallid as her skin,

clutched to her chest. As I reach her, she opens her mouth and vomits forth a flow of blood that dyes the petals red.

Waking, I look around the unfamiliar room, try to collect my thoughts. What did that strange dream mean? Did it mean anything at all?

I go downstairs to where Sarah is getting breakfast ready.

“Toast or cereal?” she asks, passing me a cup of tea.

“Muesli, if you’ve got it,” I tell her. She has.

“Did you sleep well?”

“Well enough,” I reply. “Better than I did when I lived here, I think.”

“No, you never slept well, then. You were an... odd child, if you don’t mind me saying it; lonely.”

I shrug. “I was glad to leave.”

I’d spent as much time out of the house as I could and the rest of it in my bedroom, hiding away, trying to escape the toxic atmosphere of the house. I’d never felt loved. I’d always felt alone.

I hate to be reminded of that time.

“Oh, I saw your daughter yesterday,” I say, changing the topic.

Eyebrow raised, Sarah asks, “Really?”

“Yes. She seems very pleasant.” I suppose she is surprised due to her daughter’s shyness. She seems much like I was at that age, lonely and terrified. This house does that to you. My father did that. I’ll be glad to go. Selling it, I think to myself, and forcing Sarah and Annie to move would probably be doing the girl a favour.

“She’s quiet and no trouble,” her mother assures me. I can imagine her assuring my father of that. He had quite the Victorian approach to children.

I nod, then tell her, “I’m going out.”

I haven’t been in the house twenty-four hours, yet I’m relieved to get outside, breathe fresh air.

I spend the day wandering the steep, narrow streets of Breedon, find a cafe in which to have lunch, anything to avoid returning to the house. I suppose I should’ve brought my laptop, done some work, but care not to return too soon.

On my way back that afternoon, I spot a lonely poppy growing from a crack between the cobbles of the street and the wall of a house. I pause, thinking of Annie, poor, lonely Annie, and pick it for her.

Arriving back at the house, I climb the stairs in search of Annie.

“I brought you something,” I tell her, looking in through the open bedroom door. Like the rest of the house, the room is cramped with furniture, a bed and various cupboards.

“A gift? For me?” she asks, looking up from where she lies on the bed.

“A poppy to brighten this dreary room.”

“I love them,” Annie tells me. “They remind me of blood. It’s as if blood has been spilt.” She rests it on the dark wood of the bedside cupboard and the petals do, indeed, make it seem as if life has poured out upon it. I feel sick, although I’m not sure why.

“Death,” says Annie as I stumble out from her room. “Always death.”

Her words seem to echo down the hours and into my dreams, in which I see her, poppy in her hair like a jagged wound, repeating the word again and again as if it were a mantra.

Waking, I am certain the dream means something, but what it means escapes me.

As I rise from the bed, I see Annie’s face, then realise it is not her face, but mine reflected in a mirror. I am still half-asleep. I feel confused. Meaning escapes me.

I stumble my way downstairs to where Sarah is making breakfast. There is a young girl with her, but not Annie.

“Who’s this?” I demand, pointing at the little girl, who recoils in fright from my gesture.

“My daughter, Lily,” Sarah says, confused. The resemblance is uncanny, the blonde hair, the blue eyes. Only the shape of the chin is different and raises, once more, questions in my mind.

However, such questions are drowned in confusion as I stumble away, saying, “But, Annie...?”

I feel memories fighting to the surface, demanding to be recalled. Dare I?

“Bill, what’s wrong?” Sarah calls after me, chasing me up the stairs.

“Annie. I thought Annie was your daughter.”

“Annie?”

“The little girl up here...”

I throw Annie’s bedroom door open, but aside from the poppy I left there, it’s clear it’s long gone unused.

“There’s no little girl up here,” Sarah tells me. “Lily’s room is below, beside mine. This room hasn’t been used in years...”

“But, Annie...?” The girl’s face swirls before me and other, as-yet-unclear memories follow in its wake.

“Annie? That was the name you gave your imaginary sister when you were little, after your mother died. She kept you company. You were such an odd, lonely boy.” Her eyes seem to say I’m still odd.

I barely have a moment to consider her words before the dam wall breaks and the memories flood back. My mother, lying, dying after a fall down the stairs, a livid red gas on the side of her head like a bloody poppy. Wandering through fields or sitting in my room, Annie at my side. The sister I never had, who never existed. Part of the past I thought I’d escaped.

I howl in anguish and fall into Sarah’s arms.

I remember it all: everything I’d tried to forget.



# THE FINAL EQUATION

*Damir Salkovic*

*Watch the scientists, they are responsible  
for a lot that is coming back...*

Danforth knew he was dreaming, but could not wake up. Trapped behind his dream-self's eyes, unable to speak or move, he could do no more but watch events unravel like a spool of film in a broken projector.

It was the Committee session all over again: the same drab, oval conference room, the same bland faces and questioning stares. He could see himself standing in front of the presentation screen -- a tall, stooped man with a slight paunch, balding, gray before his time, his owlish face framed by thick glasses. In the front row, Renevier and Zhang tried to find somewhere to look, embarrassment heavy upon their shoulders. Osterman, the chairman of the Committee, was casting pointed glances around, clearing his throat to speak.

"In other words, Mr. Danforth, what you're telling us is that your search yielded no results." Caught in the hawkish stare, Danforth felt naked, exposed. The old man had opposed the experiment from the proposal stage to its dismal conclusion. Now he was out for blood.

"We're still looking in the lighter part of the scale." Dream-Danforth shuffled his papers and fiddled with his spectacles. "But at this point it is safe to say the probability of confirmed discovery is low."

"How low, exactly?" The even, clipped voice grated in Danforth's ears. He groped for a response, found nothing. Renevier was shaking his head; the three of them had shared in the experiment's failure, but right now it was Danforth taking the full brunt of the backlash.

"Low enough to be negligible."

"Negligible." Leaning heavily on a cane, Osterman helped himself to his feet and took a few steps toward the screen. This was where the sequence of events went wrong, the dream diverging from the reality experienced by Danforth, who was but a presence in the dream-Danforth's

head. "Perhaps you're reading the wrong charts, Mr. Danforth. Perhaps you have already found something -- or it has found you."

A peculiar change in perspective took place; with each step the old man seemed to grow larger, tower over the conference table. The room began to fade away into darkness as the Osterman-thing crept forward, bigger and bigger, a swirl of shadows in the vague outline of a man. Space ceased to exist: the colossal, inconstant form filled the world and the heavens, blotted out the stars. It was the demon of the particle accelerator, Danforth realized, the thing they had worshipped in the underground temple; the answer to the unknowable riddle of Creation.

"Look at me." Its voice was the whisper of winds across interminable abysses.

Danforth screamed at his dream-self not to look, but the eyes traveled upward, into the face of the bleak and pitiless god, into the pale fire of the indifferent, alien eyes. Madness capered on the edge of his mind; primitive instincts, dormant for untold generations, urged him to run, but his feet were rooted to the spot. The god raised one arm in which galaxies corded and bunched like sinews and made the blessing over the man's head.



He started awake, his sheets damp with sweat, the taste of the nightmare sour in his mouth. The room was awash in the flickering blue light of the television screen. Outside the wail of police sirens rent the night and the street swam in a dirty neon glow; dawn was still hours away. Images of death and violence flashed across the silent screen: riots had broken out in Venezuela, and somewhere in Europe armed men were marching in front of a military compound, balaclavas pulled over their faces. Blood ran in rivulets down a cobbled courtyard. Danforth got up and made coffee, but his stomach rebelled and it sat cooling in his mug.

The phone rang an hour or so later. He hesitated to answer, suddenly beset by an irrational premonition that what came from the other end would be the croak of the thing in his dream. Holding the device well away from his face, he pressed the call answer button, his breathing loud in the silence.

"Richard." The voice was thick and slurred; it stumbled over Danforth's name like over a gravestone. "You there?"

"I'm here."

“Wanted to be the first to give you the news.” Renevier was drunk, but there was something else in his voice: a feverish undertone, barely contained. “Osterman’s dead, Richard. Died last night in the lab.” The phone uttered a laugh that was not a laugh. “I tried to call Zhang, but the Bureau still won’t let his calls through.”

“How?” For a moment Danforth was stunned by the news; then he remembered his dream and his stomach knotted in vague terror.

“Heart attack, they say. Old bastard worked himself to death. His health had been poor for years.” The drunken voice crackled with malicious glee. “Sometimes I felt like the only thing keeping him alive was the thought of running the project into the ground. Of proving the whole damn Standard Model wrong. Poor senile bastard. He’d found religion, you know.” In Renevier’s reckoning this counted as the ultimate sin. “Lean not on your own understanding, that sort of thing.”

“It wasn’t his fault.” Danforth rubbed the bridge of his nose. The screen cut to a scene in front of a suburban house, where a severed head gaped blindly from the picket of a fence. A fat, bewildered-looking man in a bloodstained undershirt was led away by policemen in riot gear, while a crowd gathered round to watch, their faces blank and impassive. “You should get some sleep. Try not to think about it.”

“I can’t. Every time I close my eyes I see the readouts.” A deep sigh. “Nothing makes sense. Energy doesn’t vanish without a trace. A collision of proton beams...”

“There must’ve been a problem with the data readouts, or a mechanical failure of some sort, like that time with the magnets.” Danforth was suddenly very tired; the insides of his eyelids felt like sand. “Listen, I’ll have to call you later. Where are you now anyway? Geneva?”

“Osaka,” came the reply. “I’m being wooed by a Korean electronics conglomerate. The role of the corporate harlot is not entirely disagreeable. You should give it a try.”

In spite of his mood, Danforth was grinning as he hung up. Of the army of physicists involved in the experiment Renevier had been the most optimistic and determined, his enthusiasm and manic energy drawing the best from his collaborators. Consequently, he’d had the hardest time accepting the experiment’s failure: in the weeks after the fateful conference he’d spent hours poring over the readouts, checking and rechecking the mountains of data, searching for evidence of the elusive particle. He would

get over it, as they all had; there would be other projects, new opportunities. Already there was talk of a second attempt at Stanford, as soon as the Committee could agree on funding.

The television screen went black in the middle of an image of armored cars rolling over a row of kneeling protesters. Danforth could see the street lights wink off through the window blinds; absolute darkness ensued. He began to rise, but suddenly froze to the spot: from the small kitchen came the sound of footsteps. He was not alone in the apartment.

The screen came back on with a low hum. The neon signs under his window crackled and resumed their frantic glow. His thoughts raced; the sound of his breathing loud and treacherous in the silence. Panic began to flood his limbs; he fought it back and inched closer to the open kitchen doorway.

His trembling fingers found the light switch. The kitchen was empty; yet a cupboard door stood slightly ajar and a familiar perfume lingered in the air. From the corner of his eye he saw a slender silhouette slip into the darkness of the entryway. His mind reeled; there was a sensation of sanity worn thin, of something terrifying and incomprehensible pushing against the frayed fabric of reality. He lurched out of the kitchen and into the narrow corridor, but there was no one there.

The silent screen in the bedroom played an endless loop of bloody horror. Danforth's fear evaporated, replaced by a deep and wretched sense of loss. He lay in the rumpled bed and waited for the tears to come, but his eyes remained dry. The weariness overcame him without warning; this time there were no more dreams, only the black nothingness of heavy sleep.



The city had become unsafe. At night there were shouts and gunfire and the strobing lights of police vehicles cast long shadows on the ugly buildings. On the silent television screen buildings burned, prophets spoke of the end of the world and tanks rolled along debris-strewn boulevards. The ceaseless stream of broadcast violence wreaked havoc on Danforth's nerves, but he did not dare turn it off. He had an unreasonable fear of the darkness that would creep out of the corners once the screen went black.

He had not left the apartment in a week and spent his days in a listless daze, the space inside his skull empty of thought. There had been no

more footsteps in the kitchen or dark shapes vanishing into shadows. To his surprise, he found himself yearning for these small signs. The remains of his old life fell away like rotten plaster peeling off a wall; the phone had ceased to ring and he no longer bothered to start his computer. For hours he sat in the blue light of the screen, no longer wanting to watch but unable to look away, the senseless brutality of the outside world washing over him in great slow waves. Sleep eluded him, reality and half-dreams blurring in the haze of insomnia.

It was in one such unreckoned hour, stranded between the waking world and dim reveries, that he lifted his eyes and saw Leah. Her lithe figure hovered in the bedroom doorway, transparent and not altogether solid; her long red hair was dull, her eyes dark and huge in the whiteness of her face. Terror and joy knotted Danforth's stomach: the rational part of his mind told him she was just a fragment of dream, but another part, overcome by bitter longing, swelled with hope. He opened his mouth to utter his wife's name, but she was gone as swiftly as she had appeared, without leaving a trace of her presence.

Renevier called again, the line crackling with interference. "Did you get any of my e-mails? I had to leave Tokyo before they cancelled all flights. It's like a madhouse there: blackouts, murders and riots on every corner, the army marching in the streets. We drove over dismembered corpses on the way to the airport and I saw things in the temples, terrible things." There was a tone in his voice that Danforth had not heard before, one he didn't much care for. "In Paris I saw a man set himself on fire while bystanders gathered to watch. No one did anything to help him, like it was the most normal thing in the world. Are you okay? I saw the news..."

"I'm fine," Danforth said. "Just fine."

"You're fine? *Merde*, Richard." The distorted voice teetered on the brink of hysteria. "Martial law has been declared in every major city in the United States. There are tanks parked in Times Square, not ten blocks from where you live. Is there any way for you to get out?"

"It's not as bad as that." Danforth had no idea what Renevier was talking about. The world beyond his four walls seemed impossibly distant, man engaging in the old ritual dance of blood and fire and destruction. "What was in those e-mails you sent?"

"I think I solved the riddle." When it came to his pet topics, Renevier had the tendency to cut himself off mid-sentence, his thoughts emerging in

rapid bursts. “The missing energy. No way to measure it in this brane, of course. Not accurately. But it’s the only logical explanation.”

“Slow down. I’m not sure I’m following.”

“What if we created a gravitational singularity?” There was a pause as the other man recovered his breath. “When particles collide, they focus each other’s energy like a lens focuses light. Mass curves space and time: gravity collapses on subatomic scales. Could it be that the collision compressed a vast amount of energy into a single point, into some hyperspatial dimension beyond the reach of our instruments? The singularity could not be detected or measured directly, but we could observe the effect of its gravitational waves on our own universe, like a vortex caused by a sinking object. Space would become distorted. Faults would appear in the fabric of time.”

“But none of that’s happened.”

“Can you be sure? After all, what do we know of hyperspace? The pull wouldn’t be limited to our universe, but exert its influence over a multitude of universes, all spiraling into a single infinitesimal focus. Collapsing into zero-dimensional space. At this Omega point, time -- at least our linear experience of time -- would stretch into infinity, or cease to exist.”

“Provided that the brane theory is correct.” Danforth fidgeted with the remote control. “Or even the existence of hyperspace. That’s quite a few maybes.”

“I’m not asking you to take my word for it. Double-check the numerical simulations. I e-mailed them to Zhang, but he’s still not responding. Chaos everywhere.” As if to confirm his words, the connection started to break up. “Richard? I’ve been thinking. What if all this -- all the madness going on -- is a result of the experiment, of other universes spilling into ours? Insane visions, or cosmic forces, or some erosion of the barriers between the branes?” Renevier was sobbing, gasping between words. “What if this is Hell and it’s all our fault?”

Before Danforth could respond, the phone went dead in his hands. The power went off, but lights danced on the walls of his room through the half-open blinds, turning dusk into day. The two apartment buildings on the corner of the street were burning, flames licking up their concrete sides, dark figures dancing around them in fear or exultation. He gazed up into the

strange purple sky, a speckled shawl of alien constellations. Behind him he could feel Leah's presence, invisible but no less substantial for it.

The dead black surface of the computer monitor threw back his reflection, limned in the glare of the fires. For a moment he found himself unable to move, torn between guilt and elation. Then he wrenched the monitor free from its moorings and threw it against the far wall. His last connection with the outside severed, he sat on the bed and waited for the pale silhouette to appear from that nameless elsewhere, closer and more real with every turn of the heavens.



A scream reached Danforth's ears: a man's voice, high-pitched with pain and fear. With great care he parted the blinds and peered into the rotten green glare of the day. The street was a nightmare of debris and dead bodies, broken windows staring out of charred facades like rows of empty sockets. Beneath the window, a group of men and women armed with knives had surrounded a solitary figure, a bald, rotund, middle-aged man whose pale face was a mask of animal terror. His arms were bleeding from shallow cuts and a wide red slash ran across his chest. He tried to lunge out of the circle, but wherever he turned he was met with gleaming blades.

Danforth caught the man's desperate eyes, saw the realization set in, the acceptance of impending death. A small figure -- a woman, or a child -- darted in from behind and stabbed the round man in the small of his back. He went down with a startled yelp, more surprise than pain and the circle closed. Danforth moved away from the window and sat on the bed. A void was growing behind his temples; a blackness that ate everything in its path, unchecked, unstoppable.

The television screen came on, thin blue light spreading through the gloom. Danforth felt himself go queasy. The power had been out for days. He tried to avert his gaze, but the screen was everywhere he looked, ominous, expanding. It was Renevier's face staring at him from the pale luminescence; a baleful face, white and streaked with blood, with gory holes where the eyes used to be, its teeth bared in the rictus of a smile. A dead face on an equally dead screen, transmitting from a distant dimension in which the framework of reality dissolved and logic ceased to matter.

“I didn’t want to look,” the mutilated face spoke in Renevier’s voice. “So I tried to take it away. But I still see it. Better than before.”

Danforth scrambled backwards on the bed until his back struck the headboard. His hands clawed at the sheets as the leering face tittered and jabbered.

“We did it. We found what we were looking for Richard. Zhang knew it first -- he killed himself, but the Chinese covered it up until it was too late to do anything. Not that there’s anything left to do.” Spittle trailed down the white chin. “The secret in the song of the Spheres, the head of the pin trod by the feet of angels. We found the black, formless essence at the heart of the universe and let it in.”

A whimpering sound reached Danforth’s ears; it took him a moment to realize the noise was coming from his own throat. He grasped the alarm clock from the nightstand and hurled it at the hideous light. The screen shattered with a sharp crack, the malignant, grinning visage reflected in thousands of shards of glass. Then there was silence, cold and heavy.

He opened the closet doors, breathing in the dry, stale smell of dust. Leah’s clothes hung undisturbed; nothing had been moved since the day of her accident. Danforth picked out a black cocktail dress and brought the smooth fabric to his nose, searching for the faint remains of her scent. It was not her best dress, nor her favorite, but it would do. His wife would find her way home. He laid the garment on the bed and sat cross-legged in the corner of the room, amid the wreckage of the monitor.

He heard the footsteps -- louder this time, more solid -- approach the bedroom doorway and stop, hesitant at first. He could glimpse her reflection in the closet mirror, through the half-opened doors: no longer an apparition, but a tangible presence. He smiled and beckoned, but her white face remained blank, the dark eyes like black, depthless pools. She was close now; a whiff of damp earth and rotted leaves, not unpleasant, hung in the air. The room around Danforth became an endless shadowy corridor, at the end of which burned a dull yellow light. *At the Omega point, time stretches into infinity.* Renevier had been right. Theologians had long imagined Hell as an endless repetition of punishment, a moment of exquisite horror and suffering that lasted forever.

Danforth closed his eyes and felt the last remains of his sanity fall away like a shroud. The steps drew nearer. Fingers caressed the skin of his throat, but their touch was a cold as ice and burned like fire.





## SEEING JENNY

*Michael A. Robbins*

### *Waiting for that Special One to come back*

As I headed up the steps to Baxter's Grocery store, I noticed a girl standing on the end of the porch. She faced toward the west end of the street, as if waiting for a ride. I couldn't see her face. Her raven hair cascaded over her shoulders and splashed down the back of her denim jacket. Brushing her hair back behind one ear exposed wire frame glasses.

Something in the back of my mind told me I knew her. But from where?

I stopped and stared, placing a hand on my chest to catch my breath. Rain drops beaded on my glasses.

Someone bumped into me from behind with a squawk.

"What'd you stop for, you damn old fool?"

I knew that voice. So did everyone else in town. I turned toward Missy Brown who some called the town gossip. I called her the town bitch, just not to her face. Missy wasn't afraid to say anything, anywhere, to anyone. She waddled about town, scavenging information. If she had enough to start a rumor, she'd make an appointment at Sally's Hair Salon and unload it. If she didn't have the information, she'd make the appointment and invent the rest.

"Sorry, Missy. My boot got caught in one of these old boards." I hurried into the store. If she caught me staring at that young girl, who knows what kind of nastiness she'd spread around town.

Bald as an egg, with an expression like he just bit into a pickle, Old Man Holloway swatted flies while he rang sales up on his ancient cash register. I once asked him why he didn't get a new one. He looked at me as if I'd lost my nut and spat on the floor. "This one works just fine and I'll thank you to mind your own business, Potts."

He didn't seem to notice while I passed by him and picked up bread, flour and a six pack. Wanting to be done so I could get another look at the

girl, I pushed the cart toward the checkout, but stopped when a ruckus began at the cash register.

"Someone's gonna get crippled from that rat-trap of a porch you have outside," Missy shouted. "If I get so much as a splinter, I'll sue and own this store."

Like I said, most people broke under Missy Brown's onslaught. Dick Holloway wasn't most people.

"I hope you break your leg out there. You know what they do with old cows that break a leg, don't you?"

Missy stomped her foot. "They shoot horses with a broken leg, you old coot, not cows." Her face turned red, a sure sign she was getting warmed up.

I decided to wait out their caterwauling on the porch, figuring I could see the girl again, but she'd disappeared. The rain had stopped, so I wiped off the bench and took a seat.

When I was a kid, Bobby Klaas and I hung out on the railing when the old men weren't playing checkers. You could get a cold soda for a nickel. Bobby and I sat, sipping our drinks to make them last, and talked about what we'd do when we got older. He vowed to join the Navy and travel the world. I'd stare west out of town and swear I'd become an architect. I'd design world-class buildings that'd stand forever.

Bobby joined the Navy out of high school and I never saw him again. Downstate to college, I'd almost finished a full year when Daddy died and I came home to tend the farm.

The screen door banged open, and Missy trotted down the steps to the parking lot. I picked myself up and slipped inside. Not a word passed between me and Holloway as I pulled the last of my food stamps from my torn right pocket and paid him. I threw the bags in the back of my Chevy truck, started it up after a few attempts and drove south on Route 61.

I pulled past the last Big Ag sign and into my dirt driveway, parking by the buckling front porch. The farmhouse and barn; both peeled and blistered after years in the elements, needed repairs and a fresh coat of paint. I already avoided parts of the barn that threatened to collapse in a strong wind. Maybe once I died, someone with money would buy it and make it look like it did back in Granddaddy's day. Maybe I'd shit nickels, too.

After putting the groceries away and cooking up a pork chop and taters, I sat in the old recliner in the living room. Since Mom died ten years before, I'd kept its lumpy, stained seat warm. She was my last kin, except for a cousin in big city Chicago that I hadn't seen in thirty years, and would rather not live thirty more if it meant I saw him again.

I'd sold most of the other furniture over the years and now all that remained in the living room was the recliner, TV and a stool. I'd had a pair of old lamps, but an antique dealer gave me five hundred dollars for them. I could stumble around in the dark for that kind of money.

I finished my dinner and, as I sat there, thought about that girl again. I knew everyone in Ryderville, so why didn't I recognize her? Was she just passing through? Before I knew it, my eyes closed.

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Seventeen again, at Cherokee County High School, I stood in line at the entrance to the cafeteria, bantering with Freddy Wilson. He stopped talking and looked past me. I turned and saw Jenny Starland.

I'd had a crush on Jenny for a long time. She was a couple of years younger than me, tall, with long black hair that she twisted around her finger as she walked toward me. Her freckles and granny glasses turned some guys off, but my heart beat faster every time I saw her. Quiet and subdued, she always seemed as if she knew something the rest of us didn't.

"Can I talk to you for a minute, Ralph?" she asked. I'd only heard her speak twice before that.

"Sure," I said. I didn't move. Maybe I should've walked her to the other side of the hall for privacy. Maybe she didn't want privacy. Maybe she did. I never knew what girls wanted.

She brushed her hair back behind her ear. "I'm going to a friend's party on Friday night. Would you like to go with me?"

I looked down at my shoes, pulse pounding in my ears. "I'm afraid I can't. It's harvest season and Daddy needs me on Friday night. I'm sorry. I'd love to go with you."

My heart sank. I'd just blown the biggest chance of my life.

"That's OK," she said. "Thanks." My eyes met hers and she smiled again. As she turned away, her hair fell down so I couldn't see her face, just

the corner of her glasses that stuck out past her hair. Watching her walk away in her tight jeans left me dizzy and breathless.

I wanted to call her back. I wanted to run over and stop her. I wanted to do a lot of things, but all I did was what I normally did with girls. I did nothing.



My back complained as I shuffled to the kitchen, made coffee and took it out to the porch. Taking a sip, I ran back through the dream, trying to remember it all before it blew away like breath on a chilly morning breeze.

What would've happened if I'd asked her out? Would she be sitting beside me now in the other rocking chair, sipping tea, while we discussed our plans for the day?

I harvested a few eggs from the chicken coop for breakfast. On my way back, I passed the barn and the tarp-covered carcass of my '62 Sport Fury convertible. I hadn't uncovered it in years, so I pulled off the tarp. Rust and plants had taken over. The once cherry-red paint had dulled to brown. I reached through the driver's side window and stroked the leather bound steering wheel. The eight ball shifter poked up from the undergrowth. I leaned in to touch it, but caught a whiff of something that'd crawled in there and died. I backed off.

I'd planned on keeping the car up, but any money went into the farm. What a shame. When I was young, I'd often day-dreamed of driving it west, out of town and into my future.

After breakfast, I worked the garden for an hour. The sun came up. My breathing became labored in the heat. When my knees pained me something awful, I stopped and sat in the rocking chair on the porch with a cold pack, iced tea, and some aspirin.

Jenny still raced through my thoughts. One moment I'd feel excited, as if something big were about to happen and the next I'd feel as foolish as a con man's mark. What had happened to her? She didn't live in town any longer. When I came home from college to work the farm, I didn't have much time for socializing. She and her family must've left sometime around then.

I pressed the cold tea glass against my forehead, willing myself to think of something else. It almost worked, except I couldn't get the girl at

Baxter's out of my mind. As much as I told myself I wouldn't, I knew I'd be heading back. I had to see that girl's face so I could stop thinking about her.

After cleaning myself up, I jumped into the pickup and headed into town.

She stood on Baxter's porch, right where she'd been the day before, gazing toward the west end of the street. I parked in front of the store, turned off the engine and waited.

Fifteen minutes later, she hadn't turned around. She shaded her eyes from the sun, but never looked my way.

Customers, all people I knew, went in and out of the store, waving to me or wishing me a good day, but none of them looked at the girl. They walked by her as if she didn't exist.

I had to talk to her. I had to see her face. What would I say? "Excuse me, Miss. Would you turn around, please? You look like someone I used to know." It would be equally rude if I just walked around the porch and stared up into her face. I put my head in my hands and groaned. I'd just have to wing it.

I left the car and climbed the stairs, ignoring the pain streaking down my left arm. When I reached the porch, she brushed her hair back and exposed the side of her face and neck. I stood transfixed. The curve of her jaw and the smoothness of her neck were perfect, as if carved out of precious wood.

I stepped toward her and she turned. My heart stopped.

"Hi, Ralph," Jenny said. "I've been waiting for you."

"For me?"

"Sure. I've got a party to go to and I hoped you could come with me." She tilted her head and smiled. "Unless you have to work the harvest for your Daddy."

"No," I said. "No harvest. I've got my truck. I'll be glad to take you."

"I'd rather ride in your Fury. I've wanted to ride it down Main Street for the longest time."

"All I have is the truck." I turned to point at it and stopped. My old Dodge truck had vanished. In its place sat my Fury, in mint condition, with the top down. Confused, I looked back at Jenny.

She grinned. "It's OK."

"But it wouldn't look right, an old fart like me in that car with a young girl like you."

She giggled. "Old fart? You're only two years older than me."

I looked down, and for the first time in twenty years I could see my feet. I wore jeans and an open flannel shirt with the sleeves rolled up.

I laughed.

Jenny grinned. "Let's go for a ride."

She took my hand and walked me to the car. I held the passenger door open for her then jumped into the driver's seat. The key sat in the ignition, the rabbit's foot chain swinging gently. I turned it and the engine growled. I'd forgotten that sound. My face hurt from smiling.

When I adjusted the rear-view mirror, I saw a thick head of hair, smooth face and clear brown eyes. Seventeen again.

Gazing past the mirror to Baxter's porch, I noticed a small crowd had gathered around a still form lying there. I recognized the farmer's bib with the torn right pocket. Missy and Old Man Holloway argued over him.

"That's me, isn't it?"

Jenny put a hand on my arm. When I turned and looked into her eyes, I knew the answer.

"It's OK. Let's go on that ride," she said. She brushed back her hair and hooked it behind her ear. So beautiful.

I leaned over and we kissed. She tasted like spring.

"Which way are we going?" I asked.

"Oh, west," she said. "Definitely west."

Tim Jeffreys and Martin Greaves

*Who knows what twists science will create in the future
and how it will come back to haunt us*

The night used to bring me disconcerting dreams which I couldn't make sense of but ones that filled me with warm feelings of love and comfort. They were dreams of another life, which might once have existed or which might exist only in my mind. When I woke, staring into the dark, the feelings evoked by these dreams would remain until they were shattered by a sound. It might have been a shriek or a scream, or the muffled sound of weeping, or someone begging for mercy. Whatever it was, it would make me sit up with a start. The comfort brought to me by the dream would be replaced by fear and confusion, emotions I'm used to. During the day, a few of the images would stay with me and I would carry them around in my confused brain like someone else's memories: A child's soft blonde head; a woman's laughing eyes; a reassuring hand on my arm. Harradine tells me these images spring from my illness. They are a part of my madness.

These days, I no longer dream. Unless of course, this waking, as it sometimes seems, is the dream. But no. Not a dream. A nightmare.

Now when I hear those screams and cries in the night, what I mainly feel is gratitude. I'm grateful it's not my turn for whatever punishment is being meted out to the unfortunate recipient; grateful they are not my cries echoing along the dank corridors. I know, though, that my time will come. It will be a beating or an ice water bath - or something worse. Or I'll spend a few days in shackles, or deprived of food. Harradine says we should think of these things not as punishments, but treatments. But if this they are, then these men have discovered the very essence of treatment as interminable agony. I'm safe, for the moment at least, from further treatments. No more appointments with the doctor for at least a few days, since my injuries from our previous encounter, when they tied me to a cold table and cut gashes into my shoulder blades, looking for evidence, have still to heal.

There are more women here than men. There are children too, even babies. Some of them appear quite sane to me; you can see the clarity of thought which shows itself as a deep incomprehension in their eyes. Yet, for whatever reason, present society has deemed them lunatics and locked them up here to suffer whatever treatments Harradine imagines will cure them. There are, of course, genuine lunatics amongst us. Take this fellow Durados for example, always shouting about how he doesn't belong here, how he wasn't meant to be here. *I'm not mad*, he screams, *I just don't belong here*. He shared my cell for a while, but they removed him after he became too boisterous. He used to call me Captain. God knows why. Maybe he calls everyone Captain. He was always scratching at the wall with a bit of flint. He would etch the same thing, a symbol and a number: <500. Over and over again, filling the walls with it. I tried my best to ignore him but Durados would insist on my complete attention to his ravings. He would look at me in this imploring way and say: *Yes? Yes?* as if I was supposed to understand what his insane scrawls meant. Then he would stare at me wide-eyed with expectation, pulling back his blistered lips to bare his teeth. *Jericho knew!* He screamed that over and over as they dragged him away to his new cell. *Jericho knew...!*

Then there was a woman in one of the rooms across the corridor who used to sing to me. I never knew her name. Or maybe I knew it and then forgot it. She'd hear me crying in the night and she'd start to sing; rallying, hopeful songs, until the guards came and silenced her. She was beautiful; at least, you could see that she had once been beautiful, before the grime and the bite marks, the bruises and the scars left by the treatments. Sometimes the guards would force themselves on her during the night when Harradine's back was turned, or when he chose to look the other way. All I could do was listen. She used to fight them, she never won, but she never gave up either. Some might see that as proof of her insanity. Anyway, she's gone now. Some new disease Harradine calls plague swept through the asylum some years ago and drastically reduced our numbers, made a bit of space to breathe out, you might say. Lord alone knows why I was spared. I still hear that woman singing sometimes, in the dead of night when the bitter cold creeps in and the walls weep. The asylum is full of ghosts. I believe they will haunt this place eternally.

And Harradine, Doctor Harradine – ha! tells me all about his qualifications, tells me he is a physician and a theologian too, that he is

celebrated far beyond these walls and that I should think myself lucky to be in his care. He says that outside the asylum this epidemic is rife, that the population is dying, that it's being judged. That's how he puts it: the Bible being always closest to his hand rather than any medical or philosophical text. Either the plague will get you, he says, or it will be the pox. This was during one of our many talks. He likes to have me seated in his room sometimes, not for treatments or examinations, but just to talk. He said that he became fascinated with me because one night I saw the moon outside his window and told him that I'd walked on it. He just laughed and laughed. But after the laughter subsided his face clouded.

What did you see there? On the moon?

Nothing. Just a great empty world.

He scribbled something down and then spoke of his own fascination with the moon, of how he would even plan operations to coincide with its cycle and its position in relation to other astral bodies. He told me he was required by law to do that. He began to walk around, looking at the various astrological charts that papered his walls, speaking of damnations and demons and things beyond comprehension; evil, sickening things. Devils.

He described a flaming star and how it had been seen traversing the sky for several days some years before. Harradine then looked me in the eyes and asked if I had ridden upon the back of that star. Whilst at first I thought he was mocking me, I quickly realised he was quite serious in his enquiry. Some minutes passed. I brought my hand up to my temporal lobe and traced my fingertips across the scarring there. Doubtless the wound was caused by one of Harradine's treatments, though when it was inflicted I can't recall. Harradine waved an impatient hand in front of me and I looked back at him and then I spoke in as steady a tone as I could muster.

No, I told him, I did not ride upon the back of that star.

The doctor seemed keen to return to the subject of astrology and of the moon. I was growing tired, weary of the sensation that all of this was, to the physician, the ravings of a madman, stories told for his entertainment as much as his own personal investigative knowledge. *You can't imagine how it feels to be so far away from home*, I said - and to my surprise I found myself weeping. I could see that my spontaneous performance had aroused some curiosity in him. It must have seemed at that point more than any other that I had truly lost my reason. It wasn't sympathy that the doctor displayed, as such, it was more a form of pity; pity for this poor deluded,

lunatic wreck he saw before him. That's why he gave me these writing materials, so I could, as he put it, document my insanity. Instead I treat the paper like a diary and fill it with mundane thoughts which helps pass the time but which makes the doctor furious.

I beg him sometimes to tell me why I'm here, why I was incarcerated in this hellhole all those years ago. He replies quite matter-of-factly that I am in the place God intended me to be, but that it is his duty to interrogate me and to discover exactly why I am here. He says I fell from the sky trailing a tail of fire, along with my companions. We were witnessed falling into the sea. He says that I must have been cast down. Then he asks me about the Moor. How was it that he was found with me? How could even a forsaken wretch like me deem to abide his Godless presence and why had all of my companions insisted on calling me Captain? Then he mused as to the possibility of my downfall being caused by one such as him: the Moor, the heretic. I confess I have no idea what he's talking about and as for this Moor, that poor fellow perished two weeks into our incarceration when he attacked his guards. 'He was slain like the dog he was' was how the doctor related it to me 'and his body burned on a pyre'. After moments in which he acknowledged my true bewilderment at his questions, the doctor adopted a more gentle tone. He, Harradine, was just an instrument, he assured me, a simple man doing the work of the Lord.

All of these words crackle in my brain; there's a sound of a rushing wind blowing in my ears and if I concentrate too hard I feel dizzy and experience the sensation of falling. It's like trying to recall a dream, but knowing that the fragments are indecipherable, that even if I could grasp them and join them together, they would still make little sense. The spaces between would be too wide to form a readable picture. The doctor, the physician, the theologian, asks me what it was like to burn, what it was like to feel the Holy Fire engulf me as I fell. These questions frighten me, not because of the visions they conjure in my mind, but because I just can't understand why he is asking them of me. Perhaps it is some form of new psychology, some random program of tricky questions that seek to discover my nature through the answers I give to odd enquiries. Whatever their true reasons, I'm not playing the game and Harradine can sense that. My statement about walking on the moon and my subsequent treatment in response to that utterance has taught me to keep my own counsel.

Apparently I had become very big news all about these lands and Harradine asked me if I realised the tumult that had followed in my wake. Luckily the epidemic, (cholera, was it?) had wiped out so many people that the memory of me had died with them, my legend had been snuffed out like the living light of so many of those poor wretched souls who perished from the disease. But there were still men - very powerful men, to whom my appearance had caused considerable consternation and it was these men who had caused me to be incarcerated here. Sometimes in my more lucid moments I could swear these men visited me in my cell, peering through my bars like paying customers at a freak show, but I was often too fatigued or too ill to take notice. To them I must have seemed beyond reason, the lowest depths of Man; the tattered remnants of a human being. Doctor Harradine was their tool; he reported back to them, it was his job to try to understand my nature.

It's been a few days since I last wrote anything. My treatments have started again. This morning when they brought me back to my room I couldn't stand. They re-opened the gashes in my back; they seem to think I am incapable of dying. My mouth is so swollen that I can't eat. The days here are endless, grim and without hope. I wish the cholera had taken me. I'm not improving; none of us in here are improving. Sometimes I see another human wretch, usually as I'm being led to Harradine's rooms and as I glance at these shadows of men, I'm not altogether sure they aren't ghosts. Surely no man could be brought as low as this and survive? But then I look upon myself and realise that I'm still alive, even though my will left me long ago. I still breathe, but my life force has abandoned me, I – like these others - am a mere shell.

None of us will ever walk outside these walls again, I know it. I'm an old man now. I feel ancient, like I'm hundreds of years old and perhaps I am. Could I be immortal?

I do not feel like writing at the moment. I wish I had a window in my room, one like Harradine's, so at least I might gaze upon the night sky. I would like nothing more than to see the stars through these fading eyes.

Mission Alfred: 12th August 2042 – DataLog 1632TR/005217

We thought it best just to drift, to save as much fuel as we could for the return journey. In about twenty-two hours we'll reach the platform; the

very edge of what we calculated as the safe zone from which to view this phenomena. From there we'll float right past that object itself and that's when we'll reconfigure the K54computerBank, or *Jericho* to its designer, who named it after his youngest son who'd died in an accident. Our hopes to interpret the tear rest almost entirely within *Jericho*'s carbon-graphene interior, where a coiled thicket of molecular tendrils pulse inside their crystal sheaths, relaying fifty-six million partecs-per-second, back to the hive at Ground Control. The whole package: a snip at two and a half billion dollars. While we drift, I might as well fill in some of the background about why we're here.

No one knew what it was, what had caused it, or why it was there. From the ground you couldn't see it, which was a good thing as there was no mass panic, no hysterical riots or people looting hypermarkets or bio-stations. You could imagine the scenes which knowledge might effect, the conspiracy theorists going into overdrive, the cults, the factions and the End-of-the-Worlders spewing their crazed crypto-religious nonsense, maybe even mass suicides. Who knows what kind of behaviour the truth might have spawned, maybe nothing, maybe the apocalypse? It was thought best not to tell the children. For the time being.

It was only visible on spectrum readings and had originally been discovered, almost accidentally, by a corporate probe in Sector 15, which normally transmits algorithms regarding solar flares from the surface of the sun. Using digital programming and IRIS Explorer 3d enhancement we could actually build a picture onscreen and see this thing with our own eyes and it looked like a fabric tear in the sky. The top brass worried about the night time because only at night could you make this thing out from the Earth with the naked eye, but you would have to be looking hard and only then could you perhaps make out a faint sheen or a flickering glint, like the moonlight reflecting on a fragment of black glass. Yet it was instigating widespread panic amongst the pool of scientists and military squareheads running this investigative program. Some people, rational people, thought it meant the end of everything and it surprised me how quickly they began to fear this unknown phenomenon. The reason for their disquiet was that this event didn't meet any of the criteria set out by the laws of physics. By all accounts it was an impossibility, it simply couldn't exist under the laws that governed our universe – and yet there it was.

The only thought that was even more terrifying than the one we already felt was that it might be intelligent.

Our satellites and probes threw up nothing, which we found collectively astounding. There was so much hi-tech junk out there that the upper atmosphere resembled a carnival parade and yet the most expensive, the most complex space hardware known to man registered nothing but electromagnetic waves. These were waves of such enormous energy that many cities experienced power blackouts, after which hastily-scribbled press releases were thrown out to the puzzled media about erratic solar activity in an attempt to calm the populace.

The official line inside the loop was that no expense could be spared to look in detail at this strangeness, that if the probes threw no morsels our way, then we simply had to go up there and take a look ourselves, that it had to be investigated close up. A team would be trained up and then they would pilot a class 3 shuttle to mosey on up there and take a peek. When they approached me to captain the mission, I didn't know whether to be flattered or horrified.

"We just want you to cruise past, see if anything's happening up there." It was to be a fact-finding mission, nothing risky, they said, in a manner approaching outrageous understatement. Of course, I knew why they had chosen me. After I'd captained the *Spartan 2* mission; the 'miracle mission' as it had become known in legend, they couldn't feasibly ask anybody else. But that's another story. The Brass wanted me and in all modesty, I had to agree, there was nobody better suited.

Jayne wasn't inside the loop, this was too big even for family, even for wives and anyway I knew what she'd say. She'd say I had to think of Livvie and Mike, they needed their daddy around. She'd look at me in exasperation, she'd say I'd been lucky to come back from the *Spartan* debacle alive, she'd beg me not to push my luck one more time and ask why I couldn't just accept my comfortable desk job, accept being Earthbound and let others do the exploring. I would've been happy to give her what she wanted, despite my sense of duty to my country, to the world even. I was balancing the arguments in my head when they added a caveat to their request.

"We've got Collins on board already."

"Collins?"

Jeanette Collins was one of the smartest people I'd ever met. I knew as soon as I began mentoring her for piloting the B400s that she would go far. Not only was she smart, she was strikingly beautiful, stunning actually and possessed a wonderfully dry wit. Her personality was so natural, so easy, that she disarmed everybody she met, including Jayne, who might otherwise have regarded her with a wary wife's eye. Jeanette and I had become close during those training sessions and I liked to think we still were, even though we only meet up once in a while these days. I don't mean close in any romantic way; it's more of a father/daughter dynamic. One day during the EMR training she took me aside and told me how much she admired me and how my escapades on the miracle mission had inspired her to become a cadet. I was quite stunned, since I'd come to feel exactly the same way about her. This girl was just... destined.

Another factor, one I kept to myself was that if Jeanette Collins was already signed-up, I wanted to be there beside her if anything should go wrong.

"And you know who else we've got? You'll like this. Dan Durados."

If Collins' appointment hadn't already swung me, then this did. Durados was the greatest computer tech on the entire planet. He could look inside a computer and, amidst all the flashes and whizz-bangs, he would know what it was thinking. He had the gift. He was on-board because he was only one of three men in the world who could program *Jericho*, the other two being the original designer and the third being Durados again, because he reckoned he had double the brain capacity of anyone else he knew and he was probably right.

"Show me the dotted line," I said. "I'm ready to sign."

Besides Durados, there was a final addition to my crew. I knew this guy was the leading astrophysicist in the field and even though I'd never met him in person before, I was aware he had a global identity, something almost akin to a brand and that most everybody knew of him, specifically through his bestselling books *The Astral Cartographer* and *A Billion Distant Suns*. He was one of those scientists that even housewives had heard of. His name was Mohammad Khan, but he insisted that we call him Mo.

Jayne couldn't look me in the eye the night we left Earth. We stood out on the vast asphalt concourse so the children could look at our

spacecraft *Alfred*, as it sat on the launch pad a mile away. Soft lights blinked on the enormous silhouette of the support complex and the blue gas of cryogenic propellants floated up from the umbilicals. I've seen the same sight many times before but it always causes me to catch my breath.

"It's so beautiful," Jayne said, then her voice cracked and she cried and that's something she'd never done before. Perhaps she knew there was something else, something I wasn't telling her and it wasn't about Jeanette Collins. It was something about the mission. She's my wife and even though we think we can keep secrets, perhaps we can't, not really. Not to those closest to us. The children gave me a hug and plenty of kisses and that helped to calm her, the normality of a simple goodbye. I could have been going to the store for a quart of milk. I was a hero to them. Livvie said, "I love you, Daddy!" and as I told her I loved her too I caught a brief glimpse of a dull glint high up in the night sky.

Collins' parents were there to wave her off. I could see how proud they were of their little girl. And there was a man, a very handsome man. Of course there was. He took Jeanette in his arms and looked as if he would never let her go. I felt something like jealousy, though I would never have admitted it. I made a mental note to ask Collins about this new man in her life later on, but I also made an addendum to moderate my tone to one of nonchalant indifference in the asking. It would be listed under small talk.



The shuttle ignition sequence ended and a craft that, fully fuelled, weighed 6.5 million pounds was thrust slowly off the launch pad and out into the gaping maw of blackest space. Once we had switched off the boosters and hit zero G, we lost no time at all in cranking up K54 to run preliminaries. Durados fussed around *Jericho* like a dedicated father. He didn't so much program the computer as commune with it. It was something approaching paternal affection and remembering the dead son of its creator, the sight of Dan whispering thoughtfully to this elegant machine was almost touching. But in those first few hours we got nothing. Even the advanced computing brain of gazillion-dollar *Jericho* was completely stumped.

I have to stop typing now. Mo has just entered to tell me we're getting close to what we've recently begun to call the Rip, so we have to

reconfigure *Jericho* and start our readings. The next few days will be busy ones for all of us.

Mission Alfred: 14th August 2042 – DataLog 1632TR/005218

Thirty-six hours have passed since my last entry. Something extraordinary happened which I'll attempt to describe. We were approaching the platform; Dan Durados was busy running analysis through *Jericho* and had processed every available scientific theory thrown up by the brainstorming pods. *Jericho* was transmitting quantum mathematic equations back to the nest which the team back on Earth was poring through. Durados was hitting the keypad so fast I couldn't make out his fingertips. Finally, *Jericho* had stepped up to the plate and was offering us some slightly confusing data, which nevertheless suggested changes in the positioning of the Rip itself. Jeanette, Mo and myself were making sure that the ship's course would take us straight past the Rip, but not too near. With the possibility of significant changes in the structure of the Rip being caused by the ship's approach, we just couldn't risk crossing the safety of the platform's boundary. Close up, the Rip looked more like a pristine triangular shard, with a dull metallic light emanating from within and the edges rippling like molten lead. The sight of it made me uneasy, so I was making sure our co-ordinates were spot on.

Suddenly, without warning from any of the on-board computers, including the priceless *Jericho*, the entire cabin was flooded with intense light and a cold wave went down my back as I detected some new force affecting the shuttle's course, pulling it to the right, pulling it towards the Rip. Collins and I looked at each other with the same stunned face, both of us realising at the same moment what was happening and that we were powerless to do anything about it, because we just couldn't move. We were in a state of paralysis and were reduced to staring mutely at one another.

It's pulling us in, I thought. I looked at Dan and his eyes were on stalks, his face puce-coloured. Khan had passed out and hung there limply, like a puppet whose operator had left him dangling by his strings. Collins stared at me. Her eyes were wide, but she was remarkably calm. I think she actually smiled at me. Then, the ship lurched, like it had wrenched itself free of its bonds and we were thrown to the floor in unison.

"Fire up the boosters!" I shouted. "Full force! NOW!"

We were trained to remain calm, but the three of us still standing flew at the control panels. Khan remained prone on the floor, a look of blessed oblivion wrought across his slack face. He was alive though. The rest of us dashed about the cockpit, pressing buttons and pushing levers almost by instinct, our training allowing us to perform actions almost before our brains had thought of them. But nothing we did seemed to work. We were moving closer and closer to the Rip. At some point I stopped and looked out of the cockpit window and all I could see was a bright white light. I thought of Jayne and Livvie and Mike, but their faces bleached out in the glare of the light as I flailed back towards the controls. Those moments seemed like a lifetime and in the midst of them I had some mad idea that I should have refused the mission. In that brief moment I felt like a coward.

After staggering around the cockpit, shielding our faces from the intensity of the glare, the light dimmed. It was like a spent flashbulb dying. When I removed my hands from my face, the shuttle's interior was once more lit solely by its own electrical illumination and that bright white light had disappeared. Durados stepped forward to look at *Jericho's* screen, just as it started going crazy. Figures and letters were filling the screen. They scrolled so rapidly it made me feel nauseous to look at them. The printer came alive, spewing out gibberish and seeming to scream as it did so. I turned to Collins who was looking intently out of the side window.

"I can't see the Rip," she said. "It's gone. But I can see the Earth. Thank God. We're exactly where we were when we started to get sucked in. For a minute I thought we might be on the other side of the Universe." She laughed, more to relieve the tension than anything else.

Dan Durados was jabbing at *Jericho's* computer panel, trying to get it to stop its babbling. If before, Dan had seemed like a parental figure, now *Jericho* was like a spoiled child throwing a massive tantrum and Dan was the frantic father trying to placate it. He said he needed to filter out all the nonsense and find some decipherable data. At one point he actually *shushed* the manic machine. For a second the K54's display went blank, and then a single message began scrolling across it:

<500.

<500.

<500.

<500.

<500.

<500.

“What the hell does that mean?” I shouted at Dan. He looked at me and shook his head. Dan didn’t know what the computer was saying to him. For me, that was the single most terrifying moment of this entire mission.

I joined Collins at the side panel window. What she had said was true, we were still at the boundary of the platform, but the Rip was no longer where it had been, in fact it had vanished completely. But the Earth was there, clear enough. That beautiful blue and white orb floating in a sea of black. Home.

“Fire up the boosters,” I said for the second time. “Contact Control.”

“Where are we going, Captain?” asked Collins.

“This mission is aborted. We’re going home. I want to see my wife and children. I want to tell them how much I love them.”

“Aye, aye, Captain.”

ONE MORE MILE TO GO

Ken L. Jones

*When the end of the world happens,
we have to take a chance on it all coming back*

I don't remember a lot about the time before the zombies. Most everyone else in our group does and they make the world back then sound like a wonderful place. I'll have to take their word for that because all I can remember since I was a very young child was day after day of just trying to stay alive by any means. It didn't matter how that was accomplished; that and always being on the move. Sometimes I think that was the worst part that and the fact that breakfast, lunch and dinner was whatever came out of any handy can and sometimes not even that. I can't remember when I wasn't cold, dirty, hungry and scared in those days but then all that was finally over. Big George, our leader, made it happen. He always saw that day coming and it was all that he ever talked about even back in the days when we moved from city to city and those shuffling oozing things numbered in the hungry millions.

One thing Big George and I always did agree on was that you had to kill as many of them each day as you humanly could, even when they weren't particularly in your way or bothering you. A lot of the others in our group were lazy and slipshod when it came to that but not Big George and not me either. From the beginning George insisted that even though there were millions of them, each one that we destroyed was one less to bother us and even though he never harped on this part much, he told me in confidence that if we kept killing them one by one and could survive and multiply long enough while we did so, common sense dictated that we humans would once again inherit the earth.

Now let me tell you about Big George. He is one of the most masculine of men. Toweringly tall and handsome and well muscled, he was one of the Navy Seals who killed the villain Bin Laden and after that was a pitcher for a major league baseball team and then in retirement became a

civic leader, a champion horse breeder and equestrian. Women of all ages admire this most masculine of fellows and all men look up to him for leadership instantly upon meeting him.

Our city days went by quickly as I remember them and had a certain excitement and adventure to them too. The old folks compared them to playing something called video games but I'll have to take their word for that because I don't remember exactly what those things were but yes, we use to kill copious numbers of those Shamblers back in the day and were very inventive in how we did just that. Some of the best times were when we'd get together weapons of all sorts as well as plenty of canned goods and bottled water and would hole up in a high skyscraper located in the center of a big town. After securing the lower portions of the building, we would establish what we called a "duck blind" up on the high roof tops there and we'd take our time sending these godless freaks back to the hell they came from. A lot of it was done by guns of various kinds as they and the ammo for them were everywhere and all of us, by necessity, had become good shots just in order to stay alive. So hours were spent by everyone each day popping head shots into these motherless things. Some days we would go in shifts. Big George always had the highest body count because it was whispered amongst us that he was the most upset by these abominations even though I still don't know exactly why that is.

Of course for variety's sake we used other weapons too, such as bows and arrows, especially at night so that some of the group might catch some sleep. What I enjoyed most about all of this was when we improvised and dropped heavy objects from great heights on these things such as a safe or a piano and as we did so we laughed out loud. A jolly part of this improvised fun was when we came across chemicals that could do these Shamblers harm. We'd dump them on them from a few stories up and enjoy their antics as they slowly dissolved away while they withered in undead agony before our amused eyes.

Early on we experimented with various Molotov cocktails and the like but after Pittsburgh and what happened there when we mucked around with fire and trapped ourselves in the center of town, all that stopped. It accidentally burned to the ground and almost took us with it. If it hadn't have been for a last minute escape through the worst smelling clogged sewers you ever heard of, it would have done. I've been through a lot of raw stuff

in the last ten years but that was the rawest. No wonder Big George outlawed everything like that after that little fiasco.

Now things might have went on like this forever if we hadn't run into Old Ben who might well have been the smartest man still alive. Old Ben in his younger days was a hippy who wanted to overthrow the government but in later years he decided to reform it from within. He was small and stout and had long hair except on the top of his head. In every way he was an elder and distinguished statesman except for the fact that he was the ultimate ladies' man and especially enjoyed dalliances with young women in their late teens and early twenties. He was so many things that I couldn't keep track of them all. He used to be the lead husky back when America still had some kind of a life ahead of it. Old Ben was the smartest person I knew. Even Big George looked up to him and vice versa too and whatever small education I've picked up on the fly was largely thanks to him.

Old Ben was the one who first guessed that all the zombie nonsense couldn't go on forever and he was the one who advised us that we should work our way to some place safe and distant, put our heads down and wait for all of this to sort itself out. Everyone hated that idea at first, especially Big George, who truly is possessed of a fighting spirit and a 'never say die' attitude but eventually, by being eternally persistent and keeping at us in a good natured and joking way, the old scientist finally brought us around to his point of view.

Getting out wasn't as hard as you might think because we were lucky to have a commercial helicopter pilot amongst our group. Prior to doing that for fifteen years he had flown C-14 military transports during two hitches in the US Army. Under Old Ben's sage and watchful eye in several stages we evacuated our entire company deep into Canada where we abandoned the copter which had for us been a kind of Noah's Ark after basically wearing it out. Most of Canada was gone, at least the human part, but since it had never been all that over populated it also meant that there weren't that many zombies there either. We didn't stay there any longer than it took to travel up through it because that had never been Old Ben's plan. So by perseverance we worked our way up to the very top of the America's continents to the coldest part there.

Deep Alaska was our goal and Old Ben was right about that too, by god. Hardly any zombies had ever shown up there probably because of the

extreme consistent cold and the hardy Alaskans, especially the indigenous Inuit, had taken care of the few that did in short order. So even though life was hard there, human life could thrive in this place.

Through the diplomacy of Old Ben and Big George we soon were adopted by the Inuit and intermarried with them and lived as they had so successfully and simply for so many untold years.

The next twenty years passed by in a white blur and then, according to Old Ben's careful calculations, it was time to take back America once again. During this time we had introduced our polygamous practices to the Inuit and had experienced a population boom. The Inuit taught us much about living off the land as well as many other practical things but most of them seemed indifferent to what we might have imparted to them of our knowledge. Still, we respected them and did not push our ways or thoughts on them.

During this time we established a hermitic society called the Benjamites who studied and absorbed Old Ben's vast knowledge of the scientific, the philosophical and supernatural. These learned men and women were much looked up to, especially Ben's half Inuit daughter Starfall, one of my ten wives and the one I loved the best of them all.

Finally the day of our exodus arrived and it was filled with great emotion. Our original core of two hundred was now almost two thousand and many of us were now women and children. Some of the Inuit came with us and a few of our original band stayed behind and after a great feast we took off, after first reaffirming our original promise that we had made to them in exchange for their help that we would never try to get them to change anything about their ancient ways and that our descendants would let them live wild and free in all the years to come. With all this accomplished we started on our long trek home.

It was my suggestion that we stay on the West Coast all the way because I had a certain unique destination in mind for us to beachhead at. The journey was long but not as unpleasant or peril-fraught as some of us had feared that it might be. Big George, now seventy five, led us mounted atop a magnificent wild Clydesdale we encountered early on in Canada. He was always followed by the Benjamites who spoke sagely and took everything in as we trekked forward. In front of them was the mummified remains of Old Ben who had passed away peacefully at ninety-five

surrounded by his young wives and many children and grandchildren. We all vied for the honor of carrying the litter that bore his remains. I was lucky enough to win the straw drawing many times for we were determined that he would receive his last wish and be entombed with honors when we finally arrived at our new sanctuary.

The journey was slow and deliberate and every so often we would encamp and scouts would be sent into the interior to check everything out. Occasionally they brought back new people to join us and always the report was the same, the zombies had either rotted away or starved to death but whatever had happen they were no more, just as Old Ben had calculated. Though most of what we saw on our journey and were able to explore was in a horrible state of ruination, we were confident in our ability to regenerate everything and get civilization started once again. We pressed on, foraging for still intact canned goods and fishing daily as well as collecting fruits, roots and berries as we made our way forth.

At first we were very cold but eventually we hit more temperate climes and even experienced summer which was a great revelation not only to the Inuit but to all those who had been born after we fled our homeland. We traveled through Seattle, San Francisco and Los Angeles. It was very emotional for some of us who remembered what they had once been but still we pressed on, convinced of the rightness of our ultimate destination.

Just about the time that we were convinced that we might be rambling forever, we hit our first important landmark, the port city of Long Beach, California where I spent my childhood years. Establishing our beachhead in its limits high atop Signal Hill, we set up a semi permanent camp. After a time of thanksgiving and rest we prepared a scouting expedition that I led, comprised of our bravest young lads. It went off without a hitch. Not only did we not see any of the accursed zombies perambulating but neither did we encounter so much as one human to dispute with us all that we had so long intended to accomplish and so, in a matter of only a couple of days, we arrived at Anaheim which was surprisingly intact especially its crowning jewel, Walt Disney's Disneyland. This was one of the few things about the pre-Shambler days that I could still clearly remember.

Tears freely ran down my cheeks and I was too choked with emotion to say much as I and my fellows explored its very much functioning depths and then it was that I realized how special that was.

Once the bodies of the dead were removed and minor repairs were made, it would be fully functioning once again and would delight and inspire those who still remained and also serve as a three dimensional representation of Walt Disney's upbeat and humanistic philosophy of life. It could well still prove to be the one that we could benefit the most from following, even in these shattered times.

So that brings us to the end of our amazing journey from the top of the American continents to the temperate oasis that Anaheim still is and, as we crossed its boundaries, I longed to put aside all the bad things about the years of struggle and constant battles with zombies. I was glad that Old Ben had been right instead of George Romero and the folks who made The Walking Dead such a big hit on that thing we used to call television that the oldest amongst often discussed. The zombies, while dangerous tragic entities, could never win for in the end they were slow and stupid and eventually rotted away and starved themselves into extinction.

Something else all of these fictions were wrong about was that for the longest time there was plenty of everything that humans needed to defend themselves with and to survive on and more than enough of us to pull through who had the will to survive and thrive. Though it took a long and ugly spell to prove this, the zombies never had a chance and that makes me smile as we march in to take over Anaheim and start everything rolling again. As we do so I hug two of my wives close to me and tousle the hair of my youngest children because I believe in the future and all that Old Ben taught us and that Big George has stood for all along and still does. Now a chill is shooting up my backbone as I hear Malcolm, one of our black brothers, sing an old blues song that has taken on deep meaning for me as Attatuk, one of our Inuit warrior brethren, accompanies him on his old battered harmonica

“One more mile
One more mile to go
It's been a long old journey
But now I don't have to cry anymore.”

LOOK INTO HELL

C. C. Adams

Sometimes the best of intentions...

*“The torture of a bad conscience is the hell of a living soul.” – John
Calvins*

“Francine, we’re good here. We’ll talk soon, okay?”

Francine, caramel-skinned and standing with perfect poise in flat shoes, raised her hands and clasped her palms together in a gesture that was oddly masculine. “You’re sure you don’t need me...?”

Jessica tipped a glance to the figure in the bed, the chest rising and falling. “We’re okay,” she said, eyelids sliding closed with the barest nod of her head. “Thank you.”

Francine turned on her heel and left, closing the door softly behind her. Jessica sat forward in her chair and exhaled, her elbows resting on her knees, hands dangling at the wrists. She could hear the younger woman’s footsteps down the stairs, out the hallway and the brief rise in street noise from outside the house as the front door opened and closed again. Wearily, she ran a hand across the back of her neck, the base of her platinum bob barely starting to grow back and stubble after the latest cut and style.

For a Wednesday in mid-May, the neighbourhood sounded quiet; even though Bevin College, whose students often truanted class just for the hell of it, had at least another week before the half term holiday. Afternoon sunlight filtered in through the window, falling across the floor, and highlighting the broad rectangle of darker carpet from where the bed used to be. The bed, cooler now in the far corner of the room, would never know eastern exposure again.

Silence again. Like the cancer, she had gotten used to its presence. Not quite the elephant in the room as it used to be; days in the wake of the prognosis and treatment had seen to that. Certain words and phrases like

“fatigue” and “palliative care” at the time proved meaningless, while others such as “hospice” carried far too much weight. As it was, the hospice had since been declined in favour of more familiar surroundings – her own home. One small consolation was that it wasn’t happening to her. Jessica’s breasts were fine.

“Has she gone yet?” the voice wheezed.

Jessica lifted her head, looking at Audrey. Sweat stains marred the armpits of the beige slip and lesions dotted the exposed flesh: the neck and chest, the meaty arms and the subtle roll of skin hanging over the back of her elbow. Despite the pained expression on the sweat-sheened face, full lips bereft of lipstick, gloss or chapstick had quirked ever so slightly at the corners. Gallows humour now had a regular part in the drama.

Audrey’s eyes half-opened, lashes fluttering. “No one... should have an ass that pretty. That’s... just wrong.”

Jessica chuckled, clasped a pale slender hand on top of Audrey’s, feeling the bigger woman’s knuckles shift under her palm. “Alone at last,” she said.

“Yeah.” The black woman met her gaze. “As we all are. Alone. Alone, alone, alone...” Her voice trailed off into a whisper.

Jessica tightened her grip. “Don’t you dare, young lady! You’ve still got that shortbread recipe to perfect.” It was true: while Audrey was renowned for her white chocolate and lemon shortbread, her strawberry version had always proven problematic. From using strawberry essence to strawberry extract and even freeze dried powdered strawberry, she had yet to find a variation that had just the right taste and texture to wow her inner circle.

Audrey’s head turned; more a falling of her face along the crisp cotton of the pillow rather than a conscious act of will. With trembling effort, she raised a hand to Jessica’s face and gently cupped it in her palm. Jessica tensed, hoping the gesture wasn’t noticeable. Last week had seen Audrey’s latest outburst where she threw a glass of water across the room. Days before that, the missile was a spoon. The doctor/consultant had warned there might be personality changes as a result of a subsequent intracranial malignancy. But then, such a prognosis could make anyone throw a fit. Maybe.

Full lips pursed in a rueful gesture. “There’ve been some good times, haven’t there?”

"Aud..." Jessica swallowed, feeling the lump form in her throat. Audrey's thumb prodded against her cheek in a blunt rebuke.

"No tears... you... soppy cow. I've had a good time."

"Audrey, wait."

Tired eyes fixed on her own. "What now?" The weary tone of an adult who again has to concede to a persistent child.

For Jessica, this was where she would cross a line - not dissimilar to finally confronting the boy you wanted to ask you out. The last time Jessica had done that, the boy hadn't batted an eyelid, but had simply moved in for a liplock lacking in finesse and experience. His approach had been fast enough that his teeth had butted against hers, making her recoil. As long as she had known Audrey, the overwhelming sensation for what now lay ahead was one of heart-pounding anxiety.

"I know... one of us doesn't have all day."

Jessica bit her lip and saw the genuine concern in Audrey's eyes. "I can save you," she whispered.

Silence descended. The hardest part was over: revealing that Audrey may just possibly have a choice. The bigger woman's eyes slid closed. Jessica strained to hear the other woman's breathing, and succeeded only in hearing her own. Whatever the final outcome, she knew she wouldn't be abandoned without a parting word. Audrey would run true to form.

Audrey's lips parted in a sigh. "Why won't you let me go?"

That very question and scenario had played out in Jessica's mind many times before, weighing what to say and what to do. With the moment now at hand, she couldn't do anything except play it by ear. She grimaced in a flutter of self-loathing. "Because I can save you."

"Because you think you can save me."

"I know I can. You may not –"

"Don't presume to tell me my own mind. You might have sat with me, but... you're not in this with me." Her eyes opened. "I don't even have to... tell you not to forget it. Because I know you won't. Neither of us will."

"I don't have to tell you that this is hard for me too," Jessica said. She bit her lip, wondering if tears would come, but none came. *Not a soap opera*, she thought. "You may be ready to go, but I'm not ready to lose you. There. I said it and I'll keep saying it; I don't want to lose you." She brought a palm up, raking slender fingers through her hair.

"I know." Her shoulder lifted slightly. "But you're going to."

"You don't... want me to try?"

"Try what?"

"You know..."

Something in Audrey's half-lidded gaze stirred, roused by a wary curiosity and only after some time did she curl her lip, as if to mentally confirm what she would say. "Baby, listen. Consider this a... last will... and testament. It's not for us... to decide who lives and who dies. For you... to consider this..."

At some point in the midst of the pros and cons of power and its misuse, Jessica's mind drifted a little. Days of Audrey on her deathbed sweating her way through fresh bed linen and nightwear had bled into each other... enough so that what Jessica first latched on to as idle escapism soon became the most viable solution. Early forays into witchcraft had met with varying degrees of success. An attempt to levitate a pencil had proven successful, fire from ice had proven tricky (although on a couple of occasions, the iced tea boasted a flickering flame in the glass) and on having swatted a fly with a rolled up newspaper, the right blend of cadence, wording, intonation, gestures and props had resulted in the flattened insect crawling along the very newspaper it was smeared across. Subsequent flies appeared unharmed after their ordeal, and had emboldened her.

Jessica wondered if this was how normal people became unhinged from reality. Vague recollections of quotes from Jurassic Park films came to mind: the road to hell was paved with good intentions, that some people were so preoccupied with whether they could that they didn't stop to think if they should. Of course, Jessica thought she should, since she didn't want to lose her friend. The woman could be abrupt to many, but had proven to be a big sister in –

"...how... it should be."

Jessica nodded.

"You've got a tendency... to keep your head in the clouds. It's not a bad thing. But do try to pay reality a visit once in a while. Okay?"

"I'll keep my feet on the ground."

"Promise me." The voice grew stern despite the whisper.

"I promise."

Palms on her knees, Jessica sat forward, scrutinising every movement, every nuance of the other woman's body. Had Audrey known

what was coming, she surely would have found the strength to interject. Audrey didn't know her own mind, so it fell to Jessica to save her friend from herself.

Coarse dreads of dry hair scratched against the pillow as Audrey's head rolled back, lips parted, her eyelids fluttering closed. Jessica drew a deep breath and began the incantation under her breath. Words rose to her lips in a smooth cadence as her hands and fingers traced intricate patterns in the air. On one circuit of her hand, she plucked a sharpened nail file from her pocket and sliced herself across her other palm with it, wincing and nearly breaking the flow of the incantation. Had she been a more proficient spell caster, the drawing of blood would have caused no more pain or injury than the passage of a strand of horsehair. Placing her bloodied palm atop the other woman's hand, she continued the incantation, her free hand still weaving its own path in the air. Glowing motes coalesced and encircled Audrey until moments after the incantation.

Jessica gently lifted her palm from the other woman's hand, seeing no trace of blood on the brown skin. She looked at her own palm, her flesh a pale ivory. Again, unmarked by any blood. A fragile smile crept across her face.

Did it...?

"Audrey?" she whispered.

No answer.

Thoughts of various scenarios assailed Jessica like dust in a strong wind. Did the spell work? Would it take a while to manifest? Would it manifest too late? What if the cancer didn't—?

Audrey sat bolt upright, drawing a sucking gasp of air. Her eyes rolled back in her head before darting over the room, her chest hitching in her slip.

"Hey," Jessica soothed – and still wide-eyed, Audrey turned on her with the speed of a reptile. Jessica drew back, giving the other woman a chance to collect herself.

"How do you feel?" She wet her lips, watching Audrey relax by degrees, her breathing slowing, the tension easing from her shoulders, hands clasping her elbows. One finger traced a sore on the back of her elbow.

"You know, I thought that was it for a minute." Audrey's eyes lit with a brief exhilaration as she let out a shaky whoosh of relief... only for

her expression to falter when she met Jessica's gaze. Both women grew solemn.

Jessica clasped her hands together and swallowed.

Audrey's eyebrows drew together. "What?" The one syllable was lengthy and drawn out. Almost a warning.

The air felt still. Stifling, even. "Did it work?"

The scowl that came in reply silenced Jessica more effectively than any insult or beating and she felt her stomach clench like a fist. The look in Audrey's eyes was pure and merciless fury. Jessica had never seen Audrey like this – not even the time when, doing night shift on Gleason Ward, one skinny black girl had called Audrey a fat cunt.

"What did you do?" The tone was soft and laced with warning.

Jessica opened her mouth to speak and swallowed, struggling to find one word or phrase that wouldn't sound pathetic and stupid.

"What... did you... do?"

"I cured you." She cleared her throat and nodded, as if this would make the predicament clearer.

Audrey's nostrils flared. "I see."

She lowered her face into her hands, her shoulders heaving. Jessica listened when the sobs came, reached forward to comfort her... and stopped.

Lesions – and sores – marred Audrey's flesh. One of the new sores on her arm wept, as did the woman herself.

Oh shit.

Jessica clasped a hand to her mouth as she watched, processing this new development. "I know that some treatments might not have the same efficacy, but I think if we tried again with a –"

Still in front of her eyes, Audrey's hands had balled into powerful fists.

Her shoulders rose and fell, shuddering. "Do you know why I wanted to die?"

Jessica shook her head, not realising the gesture couldn't be seen.

"Because I thought I might get some release." A pause. "I just lie here, looking into Hell. Think what a shitty hand you must have been dealt to think that" – her voice cracked – "death is the easy way out."

"But it doesn't have to be," Jessica pleaded.

...and shrank back as Audrey's head whipped up, the tear-stained face contorted in a mask of rage. "Do I look any better?" Do I?! *DO I?!*" She ripped the duvet aside, exposing a leg spattered with lesions and sores, and swept an angry arm across it. "I could fucking KILL you!"

Jessica got to her feet and backed away as Audrey clambered out of bed. This was nothing like the friend she knew: the perfectionist baker, the casual poker player, the woman of impeccable taste when it came to wine and beer. Her passage across the room allowed the window's sunlight to backlight her, her body silhouetted under her slip.

Was it her? Or...?

"This is one of the things that truly gets me about you," Audrey snarled. "You're too fucking blind and stupid for your own good. I didn't ask for this shit, but I just wanted to die with some dignity. All you had to do was keep me company in my final hours, but no. You had to interfere – and then you tell me that you're doing this shit for me? How fucking selfish is that?"

"Audrey, wait, that's –"

"Don't fucking 'Audrey' me," she sneered, shaking her head like a rag doll. "You then resort to witchcraft. There I am thinking 'she can't do this shit'. Which then graduates to 'she won't do this shit.' But you know what really pisses me off? That the only thing worse than a witch who can't perform is a fuck-up who gets... the shit... wrong!"

Audrey launched herself at Jessica who turned and fled, only to catch her assailant's full bodyweight in her back. The move slammed Jessica into the wall, most of the impact catching her across her forehead and shoulder. Strong hands spun her around and threw her back against the wall, as she looked into Audrey's face. One of Audrey's hands splayed across her chest, pinning her to the wall. Absently, Jessica remembered the gold hoop earrings she was currently wearing. If only she would get a chance to remove such an obvious target.

"You're so fucking stupid," Audrey spat. Her other hand drew back in, clenching in a fist.

Jessica wailed and threw her hands up, shielding herself – and an arc of flame licked from each palm, crossing in mid-air: one singeing a path through Audrey's hair, the other one leaving an angry red line from her chin to her cheek. Audrey gasped at the flame's passage and back-pedalled. The two women faced each other: Jessica wide-eyed as Audrey touched her left

breast. Jessica's eyes followed the gesture, noting that the flame had burned a notch into the neck of the fabric and scored a line up the chest.

Audrey gave a humourless laugh. "See, this is exactly what I mean. Whatever power you think you have, you don't understand it and you sure as hell can't control it."

Jessica held up her hands in placation, expecting the other woman to recoil or at least flinch. "You're sick. You need to —"

"No." The voice was soft. "You know? I was angry enough to kill you." She shook her head. "That's a scary, scary thought. I couldn't do anything like that."

Jessica let out a shaky breath. "Honey, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry. I tried so hard."

"...but what I think I'll do is return your kindness."

Prickly heat washed over her. "Wha-a-aat?"

Audrey raised a wistful smile to the ceiling. "She still doesn't understand," she whispered with a chuckle. She shrugged, looking down at her slip and her tainted skin. One raised welt caught the light as it curved across her cheek. "You wouldn't show me any mercy, would you? Not when you could keep me around to suffer."

Jessica felt her bladder, full and heavy. "Oh God."

"Don't you dare bring God into it!" she shouted.

Jessica fled for the door, barely making it out, before Audrey's full weight slammed into from the other side, followed by a hard knock. A split second later, wood splintered behind her in a booming blow accompanied by a cry of pain, and she whirled to see a fist extended through a ragged teardrop hole in the bedroom door. The limb struggled to withdraw back through the hole as the ruined and splintered wood creaked in protest.

"When I catch you, it'll be slow, do you hear me?" Audrey yelled. "Fucking slow!"

Jessica fled down the stairs, flung open the front door and ran. The dreadful refrain of her actions whispered at her, teasing and taunting her.

You did it wrong. You did it wrong.

MY NAME IS

Kevin L. Jones

Is this a real person coming back or...

Her slender young frame shivered as she curled up in the fetal position next to the fast food restaurant's dumpster. The night was the coldest she could remember but that was not saying much, given the fact that she could not recall anything even her own name. Beyond the last twenty-four hours everything was a complete blank. Her eyes grew wide as she heard a low humming emanating from the dark skies. A police UAV shined its blinding white light down on the alleyway, driving back the concealing shadows. The drone studied her with its one large cyclopean eye. It buzzed for a moment as it scanned her face and retinas, searching its data banks and finding that she had no outstanding warrants. It rose and disappeared into the night as suddenly as it had appeared.

Her vision blurred as her head began to ache. She shut her eyes as the world began to spin around her. Seeing the aerial vehicle had triggered a brief fragmented memory. It was indistinct and hazy, like something from a dream. She remembered being submerged beneath bitterly cold water then a light, so much light. She opened her eyes but trying to recall anything made her skull feel like it was about to split open. As soon as the latest wave of nausea and disorientation passed, she rose unsteadily to her feet. Although she was totally spent and did not feel as if she could take one more step, she knew she had to keep moving, someone was trying to kill her.

As she began to stumble forward with no clear destination in mind, she glanced down at her arm which hung limply at her side. The flesh where a bullet had grazed it was discolored and caked in dried blood. It throbbed like a bad toothache but at least it had stopped bleeding. She knew she had been shot during her escape, but escape from where? Her mind was like a film with scenes missing. Everything was out of order and completely meaningless. All she knew for certain was that they were after her. She sensed them coming for her much like a wild animal that knows when it's

being hunted. She had wandered for hours without any real sleep or food. She had no idea if she was traveling in a straight line or going around in circles.

As soon as she stepped out of the alleyway she could feel hungry eyes upon her. Even in her disheveled and abused state she was an abnormally attractive young woman. She could hear the footfalls of several people shadowing her movements. She tried to walk faster but found that an awkward slow canter was all that she could manage. Male voices rang out, shouting degrading sexual comments and indecent proposals. Her heart began to race; she heard the sound of their feet pounding on the pavement as her tormentors rushed to catch up with her. She let out a startled gasp as she felt a large powerful hand grasp her long dirty matted blond hair. She tried to move forward but his vise-like grip arrested her movement. He violently whirled her around and she found herself face to face with a rough looking tattoo covered gang member. The young hoodlum grinned savagely like a hungry wolf that had snared its first meal in days. The leering young man that had her by the hair pulled her closer to him. She could smell his overpowering breath. It stank of cheap booze and marijuana.

“Where you going to, blondie?”

“She weakly mumbled, “I don’t know.”

He chuckled upon hearing this. “If you don’t know then who does?”

“Please just let me go. I’m having a real bad day and I don’t need this right now.”

The young sadist, every inch the product of the animalistic environment that he was forced to exist in, was not at all moved by her plea for clemency.

He yanked on her hair even harder as he hissed, “Well now, princess, I’ve a feeling that your day is about to get a lot worse.”

The brutal young hooligans were so intent on tormenting their latest victim that they failed to notice that an expensive looking black sedan that was wholly out of place in this poverty stricken neighborhood had silently glided to a stop a few feet from where they stood. An authoritative voice rang out above the terrified girl’s pitiful cries. “I think you have something that belongs to us.”

The gang members turned and sized up the three men that had exited the vehicle. They wore matching dark suits and had a decidedly

military bearing about them.

The self-appointed leader of the street gang snarled, “Who the hell do you think you’re talking to, white boy? This is our neighborhood. Everything in it belongs to us, bitch! So get back into your ride before you get hurt!”

One of the men in dark suits let out a frustrated sigh. “There’s always some jackass trying to ice skate up hill.”

He produced, seemingly out of thin air, a deadly looking compact submachine gun. The weapon spit fire. The suppressed machine pistol made very little sound as it spewed out death. Before the young gang members fell to the pavement in twitching bloody heaps, one of them managed to get off a few rounds with his Saturday night special. The dying criminals’ parting gesture of defiance had no effect on his adversary. The bullets impacted harmlessly with body armor that was invisible to the naked eye beneath the sharp dressed men’s clothing.

One of them spoke into a comlink on his wrist. “This is Echo Team. We have secured the package and are returning to home plate, ETA seventeen minutes.”

She wiped away the blood that had splattered on her face and looked at the men who had cut down her attackers. She noticed something very odd about them. Although they had different hair styles and one of them had a tidy looking mustache, they all appeared to be virtually identical.

Before she had too much time to ponder this, a loud humming began to echo across the night sky. A police UAV had arrived at the scene. It hovered menacingly above the armed men as it shined its blinding spotlight on the street below. In a metallic impersonal voice it ordered them to drop their weapons and lie face down on the ground. In unison the strangely identical trio raised their submachine guns and sent a barrage of lead flying towards the drone.

The terrified girl scrambled on her hands and knees, trying to put as much distance as humanly possible between herself and the small war that had broken out on the street. The drone zigzagged as it gained altitude to evade the hail of bullets. The UAV righted itself before unleashing a deadly AG missile. The expensive black sedan, the three gun men and a large section of a nearby apartment building vanished in a blinding white flash. Every car alarm within a mile distance went off simultaneously. Although

she could not hear the clamor, she felt something trickling down her neck. She touched it with her one good hand and was surprised to see that her ears bled. She began to feel an intense heat. In her dazed condition it took her a few seconds to realize that the car she had taken shelter behind was in flames. Its gas tank would explode any minute. She knew she had to move or be roasted alive but she could not rise, no matter how hard she tried. Her last reserve of strength had been completely exhausted. She leaned back against the burning car, prepared to meet her Maker. A hint of a smile crossed her lips. There was something strangely comforting about the pain and misery that was all she had known coming to an end.

Just when she had resigned herself to her fate a pair of strong large hands reached down and snatched her up. She was effortlessly thrown over her rescuer's shoulder in a fireman's carry. She tried to see who had saved her life but her eyes were too irritated by the smoke filled air that filled the ruined street. She tried to mumble some words of gratitude but no sound would emerge from her mouth. She fought to stay awake but the need for sleep was too overpowering; she stopped struggling against it and gave in, letting the blackness take her.

When she finally came to she had no idea where she was. Her body was a collection of misery. The surrounding area was dimly lit. Her eyes would not focus properly. She lay stretched out on an uncomfortable cot, barely able to move. The surrounding air was filled with the din of many voices speaking in many different tongues, all seemingly trying to drown out the others. She could just make out someone standing next to her. She stared at him intently and after some time his features became distinct. He was a large man with iron gray hair. The right side of his face was badly burned. He wore a white priest's collar around his neck. Over his black shirt was a threadbare and much patched military jacket.

"Don't try to move, child, you most likely have concussion along with a nasty collection of cuts and abrasions."

She spoke in a soft croaking voice, "Where am I?"

"You're amongst friends. You're at the St. Francis Shelter. I brought you here and patched you up. Don't worry, I think you're going to be okay. I'm not a doctor but I had some medical training when I was in the service."

The side of his face that still had movement in it smiled. "It's a good thing that I came along when I did. The part of town you were in, the

ambulances and fire department won't come here anymore. By the way, I'm Father Gomez. What's your name?"

She looked confused for a moment and muttered, "Name," as if the word had no meaning to her.

"Yes, child, your name. You have a name, don't you?"

"I don't know."

Father Gomez patted her on her shoulder, "It's alright, these things happen. Your memory will return to you in time."

She lay on her filthy cot for seemingly endless days but her mind remained a clean slate. After getting some hot food and some much needed bed rest, she finally felt strong enough to move about once again. She shuffled over to the recreation center where several dozen sad looking people that society had discarded huddled around an old television. She sat down on a milk crate along with the other outcasts and stared blankly at the news broadcast that flickered on its screen

An attractive anchor woman spoke in a monotone voice about how the stock market had plummeted again for the fourth consecutive day and of how America's credit rating had once again been downgraded. The newscast turned from this bleak subject to its entertainment segment. A cheery talking head rattled on enthusiastically about Hollywood's latest power couples and soon-to-be-released movies. They next moved on to a segment about the tragic drug overdose of teen pop singer and actress, Mika Springwood. She was shocked beyond belief when she saw a clip montage of the star. It was her face staring back at her from the television screen. It was not a mere coincidence or someone that greatly resembled her, it was her!

Somehow deep within her soul she knew that she was the dead teen idol. She blurted out, 'Mika Springwood' a little louder than she had intended. She grinned stupidly as she began to laugh uncontrollably. For the first time she could recall she actually felt good. She had a name and a past, she was someone. Mika's mind was still hazy but as she sat surrounded by staring homeless people and refugees, a flood of memories and emotions came rushing back to her. Everyone in the rec area pointed and whispered as they gawked at her. Even in her battered condition and wearing dirty torn rags, she was unmistakably Mika Springwood.

She rushed not only from the rec room but from the homeless shelter entirely. She did not want to be beset with a million questions that

she herself was not capable of answering. As Mika stood on cracked pavement in much need of repair, she whispered the word, "Mother."

From where she now stood she was no more than twenty miles from the house that she shared with her mom and younger sister. She strained her brain trying to figure out a way back. For a moment she thought about going back into the shelter and calling home. She cursed as she discarded this idea. Even if she got hold of her mother she would probably not believe it was really her daughter calling, after all, everyone believed that she was dead. Bitter tears trickled down her cheeks; she had no money for a cab or a bus. Even if she did it would do no good, they would probably not come to this disreputable part of town to collect her. The only option left available to her was to walk through block after block of gang infested urban blight. It was a journey she probably would not survive. She heard a voice from beside her. It was Father Gomez.

"Is there anything I can do to help you, my child?"

"My name is Mika."

The Father smiled. "Excellent, you remembered who you are."

She nodded, "Yes I want to go home."

"Where do you live?"

"The Pine Estates."

The Father whistled. "My, my, that's impressive. That's the finest neighborhood in the city. I have a car, mind you it doesn't run so well but if you like and God wills that it starts, I would be glad to give you a ride home."

Mika threw her arms around the Padre and hugged him tightly. After she had regained her composure he led her to his battered old car and, after some cajoling, it roared to life. They drove across the city and each block they traveled down became progressively more affluent. They finally came to a massive gate that was meant to keep the undesirable elements out of the Pine Estates. The Father parked his car and Mika exited.

Behind the steel bars stood two armed android sentries. They eyed her coldly and fingered their assault rifles. Mika peered beyond the gate. She could see home, it was only a few hundred yards away. Her mother and little sister were so close; all she had to do was place her hand on the fingerprint scanner and the gates would open. She turned to say her goodbyes to the Father but before she could utter a syllable his windshield

exploded inward and his head turned into a fine red mist. Mika stood dumbfounded, trying to understand what had just occurred.

Then she spotted three men rushing towards her, one of whom held a silenced rifle. Her eyes went wide in disbelief as she stared at their faces and saw that they bore an uncanny resemblance to the trio of men who had been killed by the police drone. Before she could respond they were on top of her. They seized her and placed a black bag over her head. Mika screeched for the android guards to come to her aid but they were programmed to ignore anything that transpired beyond the gates. The terrified girl was rudely thrown into a waiting black van. She struggled violently with her captors as it sped away. Mika clawed at her closest assailant's face. The pistol that he clutched accidentally discharged as her sharp dirty nails raked his skin. The gunshot within the confines of the vehicle was deafening. Mika howled like a tormented animal as a bullet struck her leg, shattering her kneecap.

After driving for some time, the van rolled to a stop within the depths of an abandoned factory. Another car was already there, awaiting their arrival. The van door slid open and the half dead girl was dragged out. Mika felt someone yank her hood off. A short bespectacled man in an expensive looking suit stood before her. His face grew stormy as he studied her battered condition.

"You goddamn potato heads, what's the matter with you? You damaged my merchandise. I told you to bring her back unharmed. Look at her, no one's going to buy her now." He shook his head in disgust and continued to mutter angrily.

Mika somehow managed to mumble, "My name is Mika Springwood. Listen to me, I can pay you. I have a lot of money; if you get me to a hospital I'll give you whatever you want."

He laughed at this statement. "How funny, you actually think you're a person. I hate to burst your bubble, sweetness, but you're just a thing I grew in a lab. When the real Mika overdosed I had my clone soldiers steal your body from its grave. You're nothing more than a cheap copy. Your model is going to make me a fortune. There are a lot of people out there that will pay me whatever I ask for their very own Mika Springwood. Unfortunately I'll have to write you off as a total loss; no one will give me a dime for you, not in the condition you're in. You're such a disappointment to me. First you manage to escape then you get some of my best men killed

and, after an expansive and costly search for you, you're not even in usable condition." He made a dismissive gesture to his clone soldiers. "Get rid of this trash."

She remained calm as the identical men in black suits poured the contents of a large gas can over her body. She did not struggle; she just wanted this to be over and done with. She was beyond pain, beyond fear, beyond everything. She shut her eyes and recalled a thousand happy memories from her childhood, memories that they tried to convince her were not hers. It didn't matter what anyone said, she knew she was not a thing. Her feelings were real and they were hers and no one could take them from her. She felt the heat of a lighter's flame very near to her gasoline soaked skin. Her last conscious action before fire erased all traces of her existence from this world was to whisper, "My name is Mika Springwood."

NEXT TO GODLINESS

Paul Stansfield

Coming clean back to life...

We all watched Larry be inspired.

By life. That's what we call it. I'll give some general background of our club, for the benefit of readers not yet members. "We" are a group of friends, who come together to experience and fully appreciate existence, in all its shades. Notice that I say "group," not "cult." We're definitely not organized, definitely not evil. No charismatic leader ordering underlings around. We're a collective, a coalition that meets for mutual exploration. Not a religion, per se. Just... spiritual growth let's say.

Larry was our newest member. Some of us, me included, knew him before and that's how he came to join in our endeavors. He was a classic Anti, as we call them. Close minded. Literal. Atheistic. He put his trust (not faith) in material things that he could see, measure and easily explain. People who don't know would probably peg him as the last type of person to come to us. Those in the know realize that the strong Antis are often the most ready for us. Opposite extremes are closer to each other than a middle to an extreme. After all, go far right and one gets to the far left. Once Larry sat down and really listened, he was intrigued and then, blammo! Ready to go with us. One of the quickest, really.

And so the initiation started. First we gave him the literature. After he read it, he came to open discussion and talked out what he'd read. Then came the preparation exercises. Then, finally, he was ready to begin, take the first actual steps. We're an amalgam of several different forms of thought: Native American religions, Transcendental (and other forms of) Meditation, dream therapy, hypnosis, Wicca, biochemistry and a dash of psychology. Stripped down, we focus on the study of existence in all its forms. Understanding, acceptance, all of which leads to greater self awareness.

Larry began. It started, as it always does, with sensory accenting. It was as if he was seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling and touching for the first time. Actually that sounds overly clichéd and sappy. It was as if he was nearsighted for a lifetime and then was given corrective lenses and, similarly, all his senses were improved and made perfect. He'd experienced them all, but not this fully. So he set to work on it. He roamed around the room, exploring objects and people, laughing in delight at the results. We put on a Pink Floyd album (the minstrels of our domain) to help his hearing. Larry sprayed a Pinesol bottle endlessly and inhaled the familiar yet exotic bouquet. A window pane was licked lovingly. Soon his clothes were off, so all of him could experience and not be imprisoned as it used to be. We laughed too, but with him, not at him in a mean junior high school way. We'd all been in his place once and enjoyed being reminded of the huge initial taste.

"How about a shower?" we suggested after a while. "A real and symbolic cleansing, before you actually make a Connection." Larry was agreeable and soon after he was splashing around in the shower, experiencing the lovely feel of the water, experimenting with different nozzle settings and temperatures. Clearly, though, he was anxious to continue to the next step. Again, very typical. Who could blame him? We heard him speaking the words and we could almost hear the accompanying thoughts, even though we were not immediately Connected with him, or even in the same room with him. It's traditional to give newcomers a little room as they pass; both physically and mentally, to allow them to choose their first candidate. Let the Connection be more natural. It's better that way.

The ending words and the water cut off at almost the same instant. He really was eager. Then there was nothing but silence for ten minutes. An odd place for a Connection, for sure, but we have and enforce no rules. Eventually Tina wandered in the bathroom to see how Larry was faring.

"Something's wrong," she said. Seconds later Larry gave ample evidence of this. He began wailing. It wasn't excruciatingly loud, but it was incredibly intense. Truly, someone who did not witness the sound would not get the full gist. But I'll try, anyway. Have you heard of the sorrowful, agonizing keen of a banshee? It was as we imagine that to be.

We gently lifted him to a bed and all gathered around, saying soothing words, thinking comforting thoughts. I should stress that we

didn't Connect to him ourselves. It wouldn't have been prudent. His state of upset would have been greater than any of our placid states, we thought (and were proven right). Larry was, simply put, a mess. His face was red and raw and covered with a combination of phlegm and sputum. He'd voided himself, too, so a few of us grabbed a basin and clean towels and cleaned our infant (most times this metaphor is not so easy to assign). His hands and feet would have swung around crazily if we did not keep them kindly, temporarily jailed.

It took a great while, but eventually we got Larry calmed down. He stopped trying to thrash about and his breathing returned to normal. His screaming and crying subsided as well. Since he had clearly been severely stressed, we continued to comfort him for a good hour afterwards. Finally, as he remained stable, we got around to asking him what had happened, what had upset him so.

He blinked and gasped, and then began. "I was readying myself for Connection, as you no doubt were aware." His voice was extremely hoarse and scratchy from all his yelling. We had to stay extra quiet and lean forward to understand him. "I said the final words as I finished up my shower. I was getting out of the tub when it happened. The soap obviously had slipped out of its shelf and fallen, as luck would have it, right under my foot. I saved myself from a nasty tumble only by grabbing the handle. Then, without thinking about it, I picked up the soap to put it back. That was my undoing." Larry sighed in a mournful way. "The soap was derived from once living organisms, of course, animal fats and vegetable oils. I Connected with it."

This short monologue seemed to have exhausted him. He lay back and was silent for several minutes. We whispered amongst ourselves as we considered what he'd just told us. Larry must have had a "bad trip," as we call it; the animals and vegetables must have transmitted negative experiences because they'd been destroyed to make the soap. This type of thing wasn't unheard of for Connections, but Larry still seemed to have reacted the worst. Maybe the former Anti was the most sensitive of us all.

Or so we thought at this point. We brought our theory to Larry and this sparked him to go on with his story.

"No! That's not it at all. The fact that they were once living tissue meant that they had awareness and could still transmit, but I didn't freak out because the soap ingredients were pissed about being killed. They'd long

ago accepted their new form and, most importantly, their new function. It was their function that was so harrowing.” He choked a bit, and rested for a brief moment. Then he resumed.

“Look, as you probably know, soap cleans because of its chemical makeup. It binds with dirt particles and then combined with water it removes them off skin, or clothing, or whatever. That’s what we see. Normal, no big deal. But I was one with the soap, could feel what it felt. The soap loves the dirt—to it, it binds with dirt because it adores it, dirt and dirt alone. It’s obsessed. You know how when you’re a kid you have a peculiar fascination with poop, or mud? It’s that, but beyond. So far, so good. It was cool for the first bits of the Connection. Classic stuff, different points of view, seeing ordinary things in a whole new way.

“Then the other shoe dropped. It’s horrible, unrequited love. The soap is like the school outcast in love with the most popular kid in school who’ll never, ever, win its target’s affection, but keeps on, futilely, anyway. Because the dirt despises the soap, as I quickly learned and felt. The filth wants to spread, infest everything it can with itself and then what happens? Along comes the soap and everything is ruined. The dirt is torn away, sometimes destroyed. And so the soap is loathed. Again, the emotion was old hat, but the degree... It walloped me. I’ve never experienced anything like it. Plus, the soap knows this. It’s totally aware of how fruitless its goal is, but it can’t stop. It can’t help it.” Larry shook his head violently, trying to clear the unpleasant memories.

“You all know how time seems different during a Connection. So it was with me. It felt like it never ended. I was awash with the horribly intense feelings of frustration and self-loathing. On and on. That’s why, when I finally broke that I went to pieces like that. I could finally voice the sadness and agony.” Abruptly he sat up and looked about himself. He seemed to remember that he was naked, as he slowly got up, passed by us and began to dress.

“That’s it for me. Sorry. I thought your group would be very insightful, and fun. But I can’t go through something like that again.” He was dressed by now and appeared ready to leave.

“Wait,” I said, “You had a negative experience, granted. We understand why you’re upset, but the process itself isn’t the problem. That’s the exception. Most Connections are positive. Like we’ve told you; your next one could result in feelings of warmth and euphoria like you’ve

never imagined. Don't let a single bitter pill stop you from sampling many sweet ones."

Larry had stopped dead in his tracks and stared into my eyes while I talked. "No. I don't think any good can make me forget that bad. I have learned something important about myself, though. I have a deficient imagination. Usually that's bad, but now I see a positive side. I've had my share of personal tragedy. Career and personal frustrations, deaths of friends and family, more so than most my age, I'll warrant. They were unpleasant, sure, but manageable. But the soap, well, they kicked it up infinite notches. I'll sacrifice the ultimate highs to avoid the glaring lows. I'll take the mediocre mediums, thank you. I want my thoughts and feelings to be mine alone once more."

We went back and forth for quite some time. Nothing budged Larry. He'd traveled the short distance between far left and far right again once again, back to home. Towards the end, Joan tried a little humor and asked if this experience would change Larry's bathing habits. Larry shuddered, didn't laugh or even smile and said probably so. Then there was further debate, none of which swayed him. Finally he left and I, for one, assumed that was the last group meeting old Larry would attend.

That's what happened at our last meeting then. I include it in the group minutes because it was an important event and to explain my actions coming up. As soon as I'm finished writing this, I'm going to Connect. With soap. The same actual bar Larry used, in fact, just to be safe. For I think that negative experiences can be just as enlightening and thus rewarding, in their way. Besides, even if it's more than I bargain for, I can always Connect with a sure positive. I've been looking forward to this.

I'm making one concession, though, one practical point learned from Larry's trial. The adult diapers are surprisingly comfortable.

THE DOOR

M. Leon Smith

Coming back home...

The Door loomed.

A huge edifice of laminated wood, shut, unmoving in a sturdy frame, hung from large metal hinges. It was all that barred Gary from freedom. A silence cascaded from The Door, oppressive and somehow taunting him, daring him to attempt to leave the room.

Why can I not go through?

A glass insert in the wood, solid and unopenable, hidden behind closed shutters, obscured everything on the other side of the suddenly monolithic portal. Gary's whole world had been reduced to a single room.

Behind him stood the bed which had been host to Gary's dreams and nightmares for months. The pillow lay silent on the air-filled mattress, as if it didn't know his deepest secrets and hadn't caught his tears on a nightly basis.

Beyond the bed, with its motors to adjust height and pitch, a window, also hidden by shutters, was set into the wall and allowed an excellent view of the landscaped gardens when unblocked.

Each of the four walls were unadorned by pictures and painted a bland magnolia. A single mirror, hung by Gary himself, reflected an image which the room's only occupant didn't want to see.

A small bedside cabinet, until this morning home to the most private of his possessions, stood with its doors open, devoid of items. The only proof Gary had used it were the light scratches of the sides caused by his wheelchair.

Ah, the wheelchair, let's not forget that...

The Door knew all about Gary's battles with the chair.

On the other side of The Door, people walked back and forth in the corridor. Occasional words slipped through the frame and landed on Gary's

ears. Other noises, ones which seemed ominous when he first entered the facility but now mundane and expected, joined the voices.

The speed with which he accepted this room as home shocked Gary. How swiftly the chair had replaced his own damaged legs troubled him too. As if everything about him was temporary and replaceable.

He hadn't had any choice in coming here but now he the freedom he longed for... *but The Door...*

The Door was so damn big.

A small knock from the other side and then The Door swung open easily.

“Ready to go home, fella?” asked the hospital porter.

HELL HORSE

Kevin Holton

Something nasty out there just came back...

Daisy had been missing for eight days and seven hours, but when Carolina looked out her kitchen window one morning, there was the prize-winning mare, sitting in her enclosure like she would've on any other day. It was gnawing at what the girl assumed was an itchy leg and appeared thin but otherwise alright.

She'd heard the poor creature let out a scared whinny and rushed outside to see it thrashing around, but her dad, Steve Harris, had a strict rule about such things: children were not to go near bucking animals. The last thing a parent wants is to see their kid take a kick from the hind legs. Carolina was almost thirteen—almost too young to deal with medium sized dogs alone, let alone horses.

By the time Steve got out there, the horse was gone, having knocked down part of their wood fence on the way. Linda, Carolina's mother, berated him about not getting an electric fence, but he didn't like the idea. It was too cruel, he'd argued and dangerous on top. If a kid was to wander over or some curious dumbass was to put his hands on it, there'd be a world of trouble waiting for everyone involved.

"Dad, Daisy's back!" Carolina yelled. She'd hung her saddle on a post outside, lamenting her lost companion. There was no use in keeping a saddle ready if you couldn't ride. They only had the one horse. Winning shows takes a lot of work and they just didn't have the time to keep a second one healthy, trained and fed.

"Hey, hold on a sec, let me check her!" Steve yelled, but the back door slammed. He grumbled under his breath and shoved his feet into boots. Carolina was at the difficult age where a kid is old enough to know better, but still young enough to get over excited and forget the rules. It wouldn't be right to storm off and yell at her, but he still couldn't let her run off and ignore what he had to say. If a dad says to stay inside, a kid ought to listen.

He clumped down the stairs and saw the back door swinging open, the screen screeching on its rusted hinges. One day, he'd fix them, just like he'd fix the barn roof, which Linda was always on him on account of the bats. Still, his darling wife didn't do much more than gossip, cook and go to church, so between work and daily upkeep, he didn't have much time.

His head jerked up when he heard a sharp cry—a child's cry—that was cut short as quickly as it started. A lurch in his gut told him something was wrong. That wasn't an elated squeal, the giddy chirp of a girl and her beloved horse. That was a cry of fear.

He grabbed a .357 revolver from the dresser by the back door and stormed outside, wondering if a neighboring farmer or some wild animal had come after her, but all he saw was Daisy with her back to him. The sun was setting and cast long, winding shadows along the ground in front. No matter how fast he ran, the darkness was always a step ahead.

Steve vaulted the fence, ignored the ensuing splinters and approached Daisy carefully. The mare had her head down, her head jerking back and making wet squelching, tearing sounds. Carolina's saddle was sitting lopsided on her back, the billet straps hanging loose, the seat tilted like she just tossed the thing on.

Then Steve's eyes fell on what Daisy was eating. He barely suppressed the urge to vomit, though he was aided by the fury that filled him. Rationally, he knew that his daughter was dead. Her throat had been torn open. But the father in him said, *No, she can't be dead. Not my girl. Not Carolina. I can still save her!*

He cocked the hammer back and the horse's bloodshot eyes whipped around, strings of crimson drool flinging back and splattering against his chest. Despite the fading light, he was able to make out two miniscule puncture wounds along the beast's jawline. They were festering and looked over a week old.

Daisy kicked Steve in the chest, sending him spinning back and he felt his ribs shatter. He didn't have time to stop and wonder how many, his hunter's instincts took over and helped him keep a tight grip on his gun. He sprawled on the grass, thinking about the bats in the stable.

No man likes to admit when he's wrong, especially when that gets someone he loves hurt, but those damn bats had given Daisy rabies. That's what got her so spooked just before she ran off and that was why she was bearing down on Steve now, legs shaking and head jerking as her inflamed

brain tissue started falling apart. Chunks of flesh hung from the once-prized horse, its lips drawn back in a dehydrated snarl.

Leveling his gun at the creature's heart, he fired, the kickback enough to rattle the splintered bone in his chest. Daisy jerked at the last moment and the bullet tore through its elbow right where the ulna met the humerus, severing its front left leg from its body. Letting out a harsh, grating whinny, it collapsed, gushing diseased, red-black blood. Still, it kicked toward Steve, trying to bite him, so he shoved himself to his feet, aimed for the skull and fired.

Daisy spasmed once as the bullet entered the brain. She did not move again.

Steve dropped the gun at his feet, raced over and picked Carolina up, carrying her back to the house. The lighting had deceived him before—it was not her throat, but her shoulder that had been opened and her small body shook as it attempted to draw breath.

Linda, god damn her, was at the Sherrys' house, chatting with Susan, as was their Thursday night custom. Reaching over to the landline, Steve punched in 9-1-1.

"Dad?" Carolina croaked, eyes wide and staring but not really seeing.

"Nine-one-one, what's your emergency?" the operator asked.

"Uh, I..." he looked at the phone. "I need an ambulance," he spat, then to his daughter, "It's okay, baby, I'm here, I'm here for you. You're going to be okay."

"Can you describe what's happening, sir? Where are you?"

His daughter's lips flapped. No sound came out.

"Fourteen Arbor Drive, Huntstown. My daughter, a horse attacked her. A rabid horse, it tore up her shoulder."

"Dad," she groaned, hand feebly slapping against the table.

Wrapping one of his sweaty palms around her pale hands, he said, "Stay with me, sweetie."

"It's not... Daisy's fault." Blood trickled from the corner of her mouth. "Don't be mad at her."

"Sir, an ambulance is on the way. Is your daughter conscious? Can you find a pulse?"

"Yeah," he said, "but they need to hurry."

“I scared her.” Carolina gasped. “I snuck up on her. You’re not... supposed to do that.”

“The ambulance should be there in ten minutes.”

“It needs to be quicker,” he snapped. “Carolina, don’t you worry about that. You just stay awake, okay? Stay awake, just, just stay awake.”

“It’ll be there as soon as it can be,” the operator said. He growled and put the phone down, leaving it off the receiver so the call didn’t end. Using his now-free hand, he brought over a towel and tried to staunch the blood flow.

She was bleeding badly. It was dripping off the edge of the table in distinct *plap-plap-plap* sounds. “It’s... okay. Daisy’s gonna be okay,” she said, voice shaky and fading. “Daisy... wouldn’t... hurt us.”

Her head lolled to the side. Carolina’s chest stopped its faint rise and fall. Screaming, Steve began CPR, but all this did was push more blood from the wound. He was still trying to resuscitate her when the paramedics arrived. The blood loss was too extensive to allow them to restart her heart.

Steve was taken to the hospital in a separate ambulance and, once there, wasn’t allowed to see his daughter. The doctors said the damage was too severe—that it would just upset Steve and worsen his condition, as he had four broken ribs and severe internal bleeding. He’d be allowed to see her at the funeral, once she’d been cleaned up.

When he got home, Daisy was still out in the yard, only just beginning to decompose. The grieving father marched into the enclosure; fists clenched and beat the dead horse until all that was left was bone fragment and pulp. Though his ribs shifted with each blow, that pain was nothing to the aching of his heart.

LONG WALK HOME

James Arthur Anderson

How to cope with a parent coming back...

No matter what path he chose, Mark Edwards had a long walk home from school. And as he looked at his watch and prepared for the beating he was about to get, he realized that the walk seemed to be getting longer every day.

If he cut directly across 16th Street he could make it home in 15 minutes. But that meant he'd have to go past the Shop 'N Go, where Carlos and his gang hung out and would beat him up because he was good in science and liked school. Or he could follow the winding nature trail through the Enchanted Forest, the small park that ran along the banks of Arch Creek. His mother used to take him there when he was a baby and walked him home from school on that path when he was in kindergarten, before she left, so the park still had fond memories. But the scenic route would cost him an extra five minutes, which would have been fine if he didn't stop to feed the turtles, or look at the alligator, or talk with the professor from Miami Dade College who checked in on a family of manatees migrated to the creek each January.

It was February now and he missed both the manatees and the professor.

The real downside to the walk through the park, though, was the beating he'd get from his father if he came in after four o'clock, which was even worse than the beating he'd get from the eighth graders at the Shop N' Go. He still had bruises on his leg from yesterday and he'd only been ten minutes late. That's why he had made up his mind today that he'd walk as fast as he could, despite his sore leg and that he wouldn't stop for anything—not even if the professor was there. He'd timed the walk and he knew he could make it home by four if he didn't let himself become distracted.

But now as he looked at his watch he realized that, somehow, he was ten minutes late. And he hadn't slowed down or stopped, not even

once. He felt the pit of his stomach drop like an elevator. He was going to get it good this time.

He hurried up the stone walk. At least Dad wasn't waiting for him at the door. That was a good sign. He turned the doorknob as quietly as he could. Maybe his father had started drinking early today and had passed out. Maybe...

A hand reached out and grabbed him, violently pulling him inside.

"You're late! That's two days straight!"

His father picked him up and flung him across the room. He could smell the beer on his father's breath, but from the sound of his words, which were only beginning to slur, Dad was still a six pack away from passing out. That wasn't good. Not good at all.

"Dad, I..."

"And don't tell me you went the long way because you're afraid, either. You gotta stand up for yourself, you little wimp.

Mark turned his head away just in time as the balled up fist landed on his shoulder. It was a good thing, too, because Dad didn't like to leave marks on his face if he could help it. Bruises meant he'd have to stay home from school until they healed and he'd already missed more days than he would have liked.

Once he'd tried to explain to his father that there were three of them to one of him, but that had earned him a dislocated jaw.

"You baby!" Dad screamed. "Be a man! No wonder your mother didn't take you with her when she left. You're nothing but a little wimp. I don't want you cutting through the park. You hear me!"

Fists rained down on his back until his father's rage was overcome by desire for more alcohol. Then he stalked off, leaving Mark curled up in a ball on the floor.

He scuttled off to his room and shut the door. He dug in his sock drawer and took out a picture of his mother.

She'd left when he was in kindergarten, had walked him to school one day, left him in the classroom and never come back. She disappeared, leaving without a word or a trace. No one came to get him from school and his teacher had finally called his father and then the police.

At first the police had thought his father was responsible. Last year, he'd tracked down some of the stories in the local newspaper. They could find no evidence that Dad had been behind it, though suspicion was

high. Dad had been working then—one of the few times he'd actually held down a steady job—and had reliable alibis. They'd searched the house, done a ton of testing and Dad had even passed a lie detector test. He thought she'd changed her identity and run off with another man, but the police were still convinced it was foul play. There was even some speculation that she'd disappeared in the park, but a search had revealed nothing.

Mark didn't know what to think. He just wished that if she had left, that she'd taken him with her. Dad was bad even then, but after she left, Mom's bruises and beatings had been transferred to him.

He flung himself on the bed and closed his eyes. He still couldn't understand why it had taken him so long to get home. He was determined not to be late again. It was just one more excuse Dad needed to beat him.

The next day found him an hour late once again, though, and he'd run most of the way and didn't even stop when he saw a Cuban lizard staring at him from one of the coconut palm trees. But he was lucky this time; his father had passed out right on the kitchen floor clutching an empty bottle of vodka and by the next morning he didn't remember anything.

Something didn't add up, though. It just didn't make sense. The walk home was getting longer each night, no matter how fast he went. He could walk, jog, or even run and it still took longer each time.

On Friday Mark decided to walk through Enchanted Forest on the way to school. He left a full hour early and set his timer as he entered the trail. He walked at a normal pace, past the small lagoon, through the mangrove swamp and behind the tot lot, past the butterfly garden and the picnic area, and finally through the cypress grove. It took him exactly twenty minutes fifteen seconds. He still had forty five minutes until the first bell rang. He decided to return the way he had come and time the walk home. He reset the watch and retraced his steps.

When he reached the end of the trail, he checked the time. According to the watch, two and a half hours had gone by. It was nearly 11 o'clock, which was confirmed when he looked up at the sun. Now he was way late for school and they had probably already called his father at home, looking for him. Dad probably wouldn't have answered the phone, though. He was too hung over from last night.

Mark sat down on the bench beside the lagoon and watched a flock of ibis as they picked their way through the grassy shore, searching for bugs and small lizards. This made no sense. Two and a half hours for a twenty minute walk. The park wasn't that big, no matter how you walked it.

He obviously wasn't going to school today. He'd worry about explaining his absence on Monday. He could write a note and get Dad to sign it when he was drunk. He reset the stopwatch and walked the trail again, heading to school. This time it was twenty minutes and five seconds. Almost the same as the first time. But the return trip took six hours and by the time he reached the park entrance the sun was beginning to go down. The park would be closing soon. He didn't dare go home now—his father would kill him for sure.

Mark ran back the way he had come, towards the school and made it to the cypress grove before the park ranger made his last check on his golf cart. Thankful for the penlight he carried on his keychain, Mark ducked off the trail and into the forest where he curled up behind a tree and hid until the ranger had passed by, making for the parking lot was empty before he closed the gates for the night.

None of this made sense, but one thing was becoming clear—each time he walked home on the trail it took longer and longer and time seemed to double, like if you picked a number and kept multiplying it by itself. At this rate it would take him days and then weeks to walk the trail. Before long, it would be weeks, months... years.

By what would have been Monday morning, Mark had walked for more than twenty two years but hadn't aged but a day or so. He was exhausted and his feet hurt, but otherwise he felt fine. When he stepped off the trail near the lagoon, he saw a woman sitting on the bench feeding the ducks. She looked familiar. She turned around and he immediately recognized her face, just a little older, but not much. She was the woman whose picture he kept hidden in his sock drawer.

"Mom!"

He ran to her and hugged her. She'd been gone ten years, but it seemed like only yesterday...

"I should have taken you with me," she said softly, hugging him fiercely. "I just didn't know it would happen so fast."

"It's ok," he said. "I should have figured it out sooner."

She hugged him so tight he could hardly breathe.

“Come on,” she said. “We’ve got a new home. Let’s go there.”

MEET THE AUTHORS

James Arthur Anderson teaches writing and literature at the Johnson & Wales University North Miami campus at the rank of Professor. He has a B.A. and M.A. in English from Rhode Island College, and a Ph.D. from the University of Rhode Island. Dr. Anderson sold his first short story to Andrew J. Offutt's *Swords Against Darkness V* anthology in 1979, and has since published fiction, nonfiction, and poetry in a number of journals, magazines and anthologies. He is the author of *The Monastery/Those Who Favor Fire* (Wildside Double #51), *The Altar*, and the critical studies *Out of the Shadows* and *The Illustrated Ray Bradbury*, all published by Wildside.

Brian Barnett lives in Frankfort, Kentucky with his wife Stephanie and his children, Michael, Sebastian and Jane. He is the author of the Middle-Grade novella *Graveyard Scavenger Hunt* and the collection *A Closetful of Monsters*. He is a Full Member of *The Fictioneers* with over 150 credits in magazines such as *The Lovecraft eZine* and *Trembles Horror Magazine* and in various anthologies produced by *Blood Bound Books*, *James Ward Kirk Fiction*, *Thirteen Press* and *Static Movement*.

Gary Budgen grew up and still lives in London, UK. He has had fiction published in various places including anthologies such as *Where are We Going?* *The Urban Green Man* anthology; *After the End*; *Suffer Eternal 2*; and *After the Fall*. He has also been published in magazines like *Interzone*, *Dark Horizons*, *Ethereal Tales*, *Morpheus Tales*, *M-Brane SF*, and *Theaker's Quarterly*. He has an MA in Creative Writing from Middlesex University and is a member of London Clockhouse Writers. He can be found at: <http://garybudgen.wordpress.com/>

Vince Darcangelo lives in Colorado. His fiction and essays have appeared in dozens of anthologies and magazines and his reporting and reviews have run in newspapers across America. He currently manages the *Ensuing*

Chapters book blog (www.ensuingchapters.com), and you can read more of his work at www.vincedarcangelo.com.

Dorothy Davies is a writer, editor and medium who lives and works on the beautiful Isle of Wight, just off the south coast of England. There she writes her strange stories and books and edits even stranger anthologies of dark tales by talented authors. She also runs The Old Curiosity Shop, a store crammed with curios and items, some of which are almost as strange as she is. Her book *The Skullface Chronicles* is set on the island – no one has yet noticed the zombie stomping around and killing people. Perhaps they think that's normal behaviour for an islander...

Rich Dodgin is an Edinburgh-based fiction writer and music journalist. Visit him online at <http://www.richdodgin.com/>.

Michael B Fletcher is a writer of adventure, science fiction and fantasy. He has been published in a number of magazines and anthologies, most recently in Pill Hill's 'Conquest through Determination' anthology. He is currently working on the second book in a fantasy trilogy for adults. The first book, 'Masters of Scent' was long-listed for the Australian 2010 Olvar Wood awards. He lives in Tasmania, Australia. His YA anthology 'Kings of Under-Castle' was published by IFWG Australia in 2013.

Dave Fragments retired to the countryside of Western Pennsylvania amid the deer, squirrels and his imagination to write short stories. He is published in anthologies from Psychopomp, Static Movement, Red Skies Press, Fantastic Horror, Darkened Horizons, and online at The WiFiles, Kalkion, Perihelion, Golden Visions, Tiny Globule, Yankee Pot Roast, and Flashquake. An occasional poem is available but rare. Dave used to conduct research into coal liquefaction and heterogeneous catalysis and that has morphed into horror, Sci-Fi and Fantasy about robots, strange

transformations, demons and satyrs, cavorting simians, the Undead, time travel, devilish happenings and Cthulhu visitations.

Shawna Galvin lives in Maine. Her novel, *The Ghost In You*, was released in 2013. Her collection of poetry and essays, *Mimi's Alchemy: A Grandmother's Magic*, was released in February 2014. Shawna's short stories, articles, flash fiction, and poetry have appeared in: *Words & Images*; USM's *Free Press*; Virtual Writer; Postcard Shorts; poems in *Voice of the Bards* and *Retail Woes* through Local Gems Press; Pill Hill Press; Static Movement publications. She has upcoming articles in Llewellyn Publications Worldwide, and short stories at Horrified Press. She has edited short stories for Brutal as Hell, and freelances as an editor, and is embarking on a spooky publishing journey at Macabre Maine, while writing her second novel, and other projects.

Ken Goldman, former Philadelphia teacher of English and Film Studies, is an affiliate member of the Horror Writers Association. He has homes on the Main Line in Pennsylvania and at the Jersey shore. His stories have appeared in over 700 independent press publications in the U.S., Canada, the UK, and Australia with over thirty due for publication in 2014. Since 1993 Ken's tales have received seven honorable mentions in The Year's Best Fantasy & Horror. He has written five books : three anthologies of short stories, YOU HAD ME AT ARRGH!! (Sam's Dot Publishers), DONNY DOESN'T LIVE HERE ANYMORE (A/A Productions) and STAR-CROSSED (Vampires 2); and a novella, DESIREE, (Damnation Books). His first novel, OF A FEATHER (Horrific Tales Publishing), was released in January 2014. Please hold your applause until the royalty checks arrive.

Martin Greaves is 49 years old and spent decades working in dull, soul-destroying jobs, often under garish fluorescent lights that gave him the appearance of a zombie. He finally decided to quit the rat race and studied illustration at Manchester Metropolitan University whilst existing solely on Pot Noodles and soup. He has always written for his own enjoyment but has

rarely submitted any of his stories for publication before. Like everybody else, he is currently working on a novel that he hopes will be finished before his death.

Ash Hartwell lives in the English countryside and has had short stories published by Static Movement, Wicked East, Undead Press and Thirteen. He is currently working on both an anthology of his own stories and his first novel. Both should be available through JEA. Ash can often be found lurking around Facebook.

Kevin Holton is a New Jersey-based writer of prose and poetry, having had seventeen short stories, several poems and a book review accepted since he first began seeking publication two years ago. His work has appeared in journals such as *Pleiades* and *TAB: A Journal of Poetry & Poetics* as well as popular anthologies in genres ranging from paranormal and romance to thriller and psychological horror. He is a member of Sigma Tau Delta and Mensa, and is currently working on his second novel.

Holly Hunt is an author living in Canberra, Australia. She writes a collection of works including Sci-fi, fantasy, horror and romance. Holly is currently undergoing an apprenticeship in butchery and spends her days off writing and watching superhero cartoons. She lives with her partner, Matthew, in a one-bedroom flat crammed with comics and movie memorabilia. She dreams of one day owning a big garden, three dogs and a cat and can't wait until that day gets here.

Mathias Jansson is a Swedish art critic and horror poet. He has been published in magazines as The Horror Zine Magazine, Dark Eclipse, Schlock, The Sirens Call, Apehlion and Trembles Horror Magazine. He has also contributed to several anthologies from Horrified Press, James Ward Kirk Fiction, Source Point Press and other publishers.

Homepage: <http://mathiasjansson72.blogspot.se/>

Tim Jeffreys is the author of five collections of short stories, the most recent being 'From Elsewhere', as well as the first two books of his Thief saga. His short fiction has also appeared in various international anthologies and magazines. In his work he incorporates elements of horror, fantasy, absurdist humour, science-fiction and anything else he wants to toss into the pot to create his own brand of weird fiction. Originally from Manchester, UK, Tim now lives in the south west of England where he can be found either working at his day job, taking care of his daughters, haunting libraries, or sitting at his desk writing. Visit him online at www.timjeffreyswriter.webs.com

Ken L. Jones has been professionally active in the world of popular culture for the past thirty years. He has worked as a writer and producer in TV and movies, most notably with Brian Yuzna. He has contributed many short stories and poems to the House of Horror online magazine.

Kevin L. Jones has been involved with the creative arts for many years and has co-written several comic books. He has contributed several short stories to House of Horror and their anthologies DEADication and Soup of Souls as well as co-authoring the short story collection Mind Rotting Tales available from Panic Press. His work will also be appearing in the upcoming anthologies Dark Dispatches, I Swear This Is True, and Make A Wish.

Ron Koppelberger is a poet, a short story writer and an artist. He has written 103 books of poetry over the past several years and 18 novels. He is always looking for an audience. He has published 700 poems, 723 short stories and 190 pieces of art in over 293 periodicals, books, anthologies and 11 radio Broadcasts. He has been published in England, Australia, Canada, Japan, India, Mauritius, Italy, France, Germany, China, Spain and Thailand.

He has been Published in The Stray Branch, The Fringe, Write On!!! (Poetry Magazine) Static Movement, Necrology Shorts and Record Magazine. He is a member of The Poet's society, The Fiction Guild as well as The Isles Poetry Association and The Dark Fiction Guild.

Nikko Lee has previously published genre fiction from horror to erotica including the novel Between Love and Lust and the short story 'Honey-do' in the Big Book of Bizarro. Her most recently accepted short stories will appear in the upcoming Valves and Vixens, Zombified II and People Eating People anthologies. She blogs about writing and hiking at www.nikkolee.com

Michael Lindquist: I have previously been published in Psychopomp, Bonne Nouvelle, Bento box, as well as the "Sex, Drugs & Horror" and "Ugly Babies vol. 2" anthologies from James Ward Kirk Fiction.

Thomas M. Malafarina (www.ThomasMMalafarina.com) is an author of horror fiction from Berks County, Pennsylvania. To date he has published four horror novels "Ninety-Nine Souls", "Burn Phone", "Eye Contact" and "Fallen Stones" as well as four collections of horror short stories; "Thirteen Nasty Endings", "Gallery Of Horror", "Malafarina Maleficarum Vol. 1", "Malafarina Maleficarum Vol. 2" and most recently "Ghost Shadows". He has also published a book of often strange single panel cartoons called "Yes I Smelled It Too; Cartoons For The Slightly Off Center". All of his books have been published through Sunbury Press (www.Sunburypress.com).

Jordan Elizabeth Mierek writes her nightmares in order to live her dream. Those nightmares have been published in numerous anthologies and online journals. She is the current president of the Utica Writers Club and maintains the website JordanElizabethMierek.com. She is represented by Belcastro Agency. Watch for her upcoming novels that will soon be published through Curiosity Quills Press.

Helen Mihajlovic is a published author in books and online magazines. Her short story 'A Dark Love story' is published in the book entitled '100 Doors to Madness', available on amazon.com. It was also published in Horror Novel Review's online magazine. Her story 'A Sinister Nature' is published in Darker times UK and the magazine Under the Bed. Her latest story 'The Prince of Devils' will soon be published through Horrified Press. She is grateful to have a very good editor Tanya Dewhurst and story advisor James Duncan. Additionally Helen makes short films. Her last film, Vampire Sadine, can be viewed on YouTube.

Logan Noble was born in the great white north of Michigan. After living a perfectly normal childhood, he got married to his wonderful wife Elizabeth, and joined the military. He currently hides from the sun in New Mexico and spends his days reading, writing and watching far too many movies. This is his second published work, the first being a horror story entitled, 'The Meaningful Dinner', but more will be coming soon. On an unrelated note, John Carpenter's 'The Thing' is the greatest film ever made and Indiana Jones is cooler than you. For more fiction and film related shenanigans, follow his blog at www.logannoble.wordpress.com.

Michael Porter is a freelance writer from Virginia Beach Virginia, and a huge fan of all things horror. He enjoys reading, movies, and spending time with his wife and daughter. Editor and Chief at Miskatonic Press. Publishing Credits: MacArthur's War (Research, 2008). The Unveiling, Miskatonic Press 2013. What They Left Behind, Plague Anthology, Horrified Press 2014. Our Salvation, Black Cat Anthology, Horrified Press 2014. Step N Play, Peripheral Distortions Anthology, Death Throes Publishing 2014. Burning Snow, Dark Fairy Tales Revisited Anthology, Horrified Press 2014. Nightmare Illustrated Magazine Fort Hospital 2014. Nightmare Illustrated Magazine Desolation Falls 2014.

Evan Purcell is an American living and working in rural China, a land of ancient traditions, friendly people, and absolutely no cheese in a hundred-

mile radius. Except for that last part, he really enjoys his life abroad. He also writes a lot of horror and sci-fi short stories, as well as the occasional romance novel. You can read about his travels and his weirdly eclectic writing at EvanPurcell.Blogspot.com. And if you see him walking down the street, please offer him some American cheese. He misses it so much.

M.A. Robbins is an author of speculative fiction, who lives in Alaska with his wife and son. The long winter nights are fertile ground for his imagination. His current work in progress is a post-apocalyptic action novel. You can follow him on Twitter at @marobbinsauthor, Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/marobbinsauthor>, or his website at www.marobbins.com.

Damir Salkovic: is an aficionado of weird and macabre tales, presently residing in Arlington, Virginia. His reading interests range from horror and fantasy to pulp and science fiction. His short stories have appeared on the Tales to Terrify podcast, in the Schlock! Bimonthly magazine and in anthologies by Schlock! Webzine, Source Point Press, Parasomnia Press, Apokrupha, Villipede Publications, Miskatonic Press, the Mad Scientist Journal and the Black Library Bolthole. He earns his living as an accountant, a profession that lends itself well to nightmares and harrowing visions.

M. Leon Smith is a writer of dark fantasy from North-East England. You can learn more about him at mleonsmith.com

Paul Stansfield was born and raised in New Jersey and works as a field archaeologist. He has had over 15 short stories published, in magazines such as Bibliophilos, Morbid Curiosity, Cthulhu Sex Magazine, Aoife's Kiss, Under the Bed, and In D'Tale, among others. He currently has two ebooks available with Musa Publishing--"Dead Reckoning" and "Kaishaku." "Dead Reckoning" was nominated for Long and Short Reviews Book of the Year

for 2012. He also has a story ("Responsibility") in the horror anthology "Undead Living," from Sunbury Press. His blog address is: <http://paulstansfield.blogspot.com>

DJ Tyrer is the person behind *Atlantean Publishing* and has been widely published in anthologies and magazines in the UK, USA and elsewhere, most recently in *Steampunk Cthulhu* (Chaosium), *Tales of the Dark Arts* (Hazardous Press), *Cosmic Horror* (Dark Hall Press) and *Serial Killers Quattuor* (JWK Fiction), as well as in *Sorcery & Sanctity: A Homage to Arthur Machen* (Hieroglyphics Press), *All Hallow's Evil* and *Undead of Winter* (both Mystery & Horror LLC) and *Fossil Lake* (Daverana Enterprises/Sabledrake Enterprises), and in addition, has two novellas available on the Kindle, *The Yellow House* (Dynatox Ministries) and *Acting Strangely* (Jazzclaw Publishing). DJ Tyrer's website is at <http://djtyrer.blogspot.co.uk/>

The Atlantean Publishing website is at <http://atlanteanpublishing.blogspot.co.uk/>

Art Wester: Having worked as a mechanic and carpenter, then a cabinetmaker, he considers his fiction and his art; he paints haunted places he has visited in acrylics on canvas and sketches them in evocative charcoal drawings. "They're just more ways to work with my hands," he says. He was born in Misawa, Japan, to military parents with whom he has traveled the world. Never had time for college but enjoys reading and learning from life itself. He currently resides in midstate New York on an old farm surrounded by old-growth forest. He has an orchard he is proud of.

E.S. Wynn is the author of over 50 books in print and the chief editor of Thunderune Publishing.

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